



Your Guide to Responsible Tourism in
Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam

Authors : Guy Marris
Nick Ray
Bernie Rosenbloom
Editor : Ken Scott





Your Guide to Responsible Tourism in

Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam

ISBN : 321658741258 21 58



123456789012



{ The Mekong River

About the authors



Laos author, **Guy Marris**, from New Zealand, arrived in Laos in 1997 with New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad to work in Xe Plane National Protected Area. He has spent the last 10 years in Southeast Asia working in various protected areas throughout Laos and Cambodia as an advisor in conservation management and ecotourism development. More recently he has assisted both the Nam Ha National Protected Area in Laos and Virachey National Park in Cambodia with the development of community-based ecotourism programmes. Prior to that Guy worked as an officer with the New Zealand Wildlife Service and then as a director-cameraman on natural history documentaries. Guy is presently in Mozambique assisting in the management of Niassa National Reserve with Fauna and Flora International. He can be contacted at: guymarris@yahoo.com.



After university, **Nick Ray**, a Londoner, combined writing and tour leading in countries as diverse as Vietnam and Morocco. He hooked up with Lonely Planet in 1998 and has worked on more than 20 titles over the following years. Cambodia is his backyard and he has worked on several editions of the Cambodia guide, as well as Southeast Asia on a shoestring and Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia. Nick also writes articles for leading magazines and newspapers, including The Sunday Times and Wanderlust. He is often a location scout and manager of film and TV projects. He often takes on assignments for the BBC, Discovery and National Geographic channels. He currently lives in Phnom Penh, but is just as likely to be found in Siem Reap, Luang Prabang or Hoi An, three of his favourite places in the region. nickjray@yahoo.co.uk



Vietnam author, **Bernie Rosenbloom**, moved to Southeast Asia in 1992 as a freelance writer. The New York native specializes in travel and tourism subjects in Thailand and the Greater Mekong Subregion. He has written and edited for clients such as Thai Airways' Royal Orchid Holidays, the Pacific Asia Travel Association, Mekong Tourism Office, Best Western Asia, Lookeast magazine, Asia Satellite TV, PATA Compass magazine and Travel Daily Asia. Bernie resides in Vientiane with his Lao wife and two daughters. He can be contacted at: bernie.rosenbloom@gmail.com.water



Ken Scott runs Bangkok-based ScottAsia Communications which specialises in PR and communications services to travel-related organisations in Thailand and the Mekong region. Ken, a former journalist, guide book author and Director-Communications at the Pacific Asia Travel Association head office in Bangkok, has been living in Thailand and writing about the region since 1986. ken@ScottAsia.net.

Table content

What is responsible tourism ?.....	p4
Forward by the editor.....	p4
Map of Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam.....	p6
 <i>Cambodia</i>	
Country profile.....	p8
Travellers' Information.....	p14
Do's and Don'ts.....	p17
Responsible Tourism Activities in Cambodia.....	p19
 <i>Laos</i>	
Country profile.....	p53
Travellers' Information.....	p61
Do's and Don'ts.....	p67
Responsible Tourism Activities in Laos.....	p69
 <i>Vietnam</i>	
Country profile.....	p100
Travellers' Information.....	p105
Responsible Tourism Activities in Vietnam.....	p109
 Annex / Resources & Further Information.....	 p141
Photo credits & thanks.....	p141





Thakek old town - Laos

About the Mekong Tourism Development Project

The Mekong Tourism Development Project [MTDP] is being implemented in three countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region [GMS] – Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. This region is the fastest growing tourism destination in the world. Every year, millions of tourists visit the GMS with a wide variety of motivations and preferred styles of travel. Among these, there are thousands of independent travellers who are interested to contribute to local economies in socially responsible ways, so that their dollars benefit local people. These types of tourists are increasingly concerned about the effects tourism has on the environment and local way of life. The widening consumer niche market they represent is a critical demand factor that encourages investment in more sustainable forms of travel and development.

The current supply of specialised travel literature for the GMS does not meet the growing demand for information on socially responsible travel. The MTDP aims to fill this gap by providing useful information sources for responsible travellers in a guide book specially designed for this market. *The Guide to Responsible Tourism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* is the first step by MTDP to serve both responsible tourism operators in the GMS and responsible travellers.

What is 'Responsible Tourism'?

Responsible travel is a form of tourism that supports cultural and environmental protection, equitable benefit sharing and the alleviation of poverty.

Specifically, responsible tourism, according to the Centre for Responsible Tourism (www.icrtourism.org):

- minimises negative economic, environmental and social impacts
- generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the wellbeing of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry
- involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances
- makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's biodiversity
- provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues
- provides access for physically challenged people; and
- is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence.

Foreword by the Editor

Tourism is a soft target. Everyone loves to criticise it. But we're all tourists. Even die-hard critics of tourism are themselves tourists. So the question is: how can we travel the right way – the responsible way?

There will never be a definitive answer because the subject is wholly subjective. Nevertheless, it's better to try and travel responsibly than walk away saying there are too many snags and caveats. The Responsible Guide to Tourism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam is therefore, we hope, the right book at the right time. Travel to the Greater Mekong Subregion, particularly, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, is growing at over 20% a year and is likely to continue doing so in the years ahead. But responsible tourism is not about destinations making money at any cost to the environment, heritage, dignity and well-being. If responsible tourism is done well, both the host and the visitor benefit by exchanges of understanding and respect – as much as an exchange of currency.

So the objective of this book is to show tourists how to meaningfully participate in responsible tourism activities by showing them where and how to do it. We have identified 88 responsible tourism activities that we think tourists should visit. In each write-up we have tried to describe “the experience” (from the tourist's point of view) and explain “how it helps” (from the host's point of view).

Our objectives were quite modest. We believed that raising some awareness of worthy activities was better than trying to write the definitive guide with strict rating systems and iron-clad rules for inclusion or exclusion. We preferred common sense. If there are activities out there we failed to include, we apologise. To make amends we would like to hear about them for consideration in future editions. And if some of the activities included don't, in your opinion, meet the criteria of responsible tourism, please tell us why and we will respond accordingly.

Our writers were given free rein to include an activity even if it satisfied just three or four of

the seven criteria listed above. We believe tourism operators should be rewarded for good intentions – and motivated to enhance the ‘responsible’ element of their services. Readers should remember that many of the operators listed started their responsible tourism business without the benefit of large amounts of investment, education, training or institutional support. They are doing it because they feel it's the right way to do it. And they're right. The least we can do is forgive them their lapses and encourage them to make amends and grow.

By the same measure, we as visitors have a responsibility to do our homework, learn about our hosts' culture and respect it. A tourist who smiles, learns a few words of the local language, dresses appropriately and remains easy going, is well on the way to having a great travel experience in the Greater Mekong Subregion.

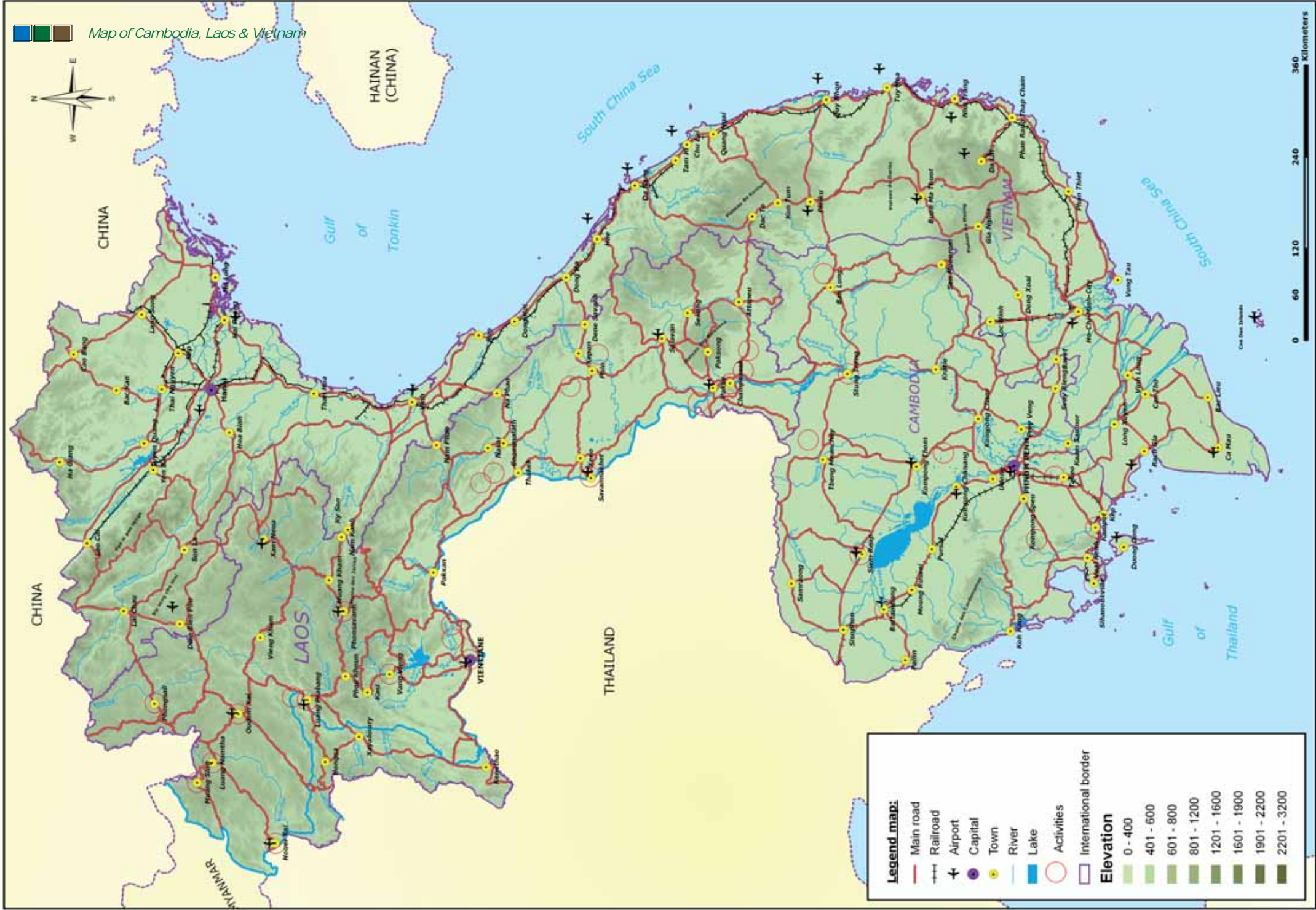
On the recommended tourism activities, future editions of the book may have more rigorous entry standards. Future editions may have a wider geographical coverage than Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. That is a decision for another day. Today, the Mekong Tourism Development Project and the Mekong Tourism Office have got the ball rolling in the right direction.

We look forward to hearing your feedback. On behalf of the Mekong Tourism Development Project, we thank you for visiting the Greater Mekong Subregion. We believe it is one of the most awe-inspiring, inspirational, friendly and enchanting destinations in the world.

With The Responsible Guide to Tourism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to guide you, we hope that you and your hosts have an enjoyable, rewarding and responsible travel experience.

Ken Scott
Editor
December 2007

Map of Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam



Legend map:

- Main road
- Railroad
- Airport
- Capital
- Town
- River
- Lake
- Activities
- International border

Elevation

- 0 - 400
- 401 - 600
- 601 - 800
- 801 - 1200
- 1201 - 1600
- 1601 - 1900
- 1901 - 2200
- 2201 - 3200



Cambodia - Country Profile

label photo ; previous page: label photo



Climate

Some Cambodians joke that the country has three seasons: hot, hotter and hottest. There is some truth to this, as Cambodia does have three main seasons: the wet season which usually starts in May or June and continues until September or October; the windy season which starts in November and continues through January; and the dry hot season which starts in February and lasts until May. Even during the wet season, it rarely rains all day. Most downpours come in the afternoon and, even then, only sporadically.

Location & Geography

Cambodia is located in the heart of Southeast Asia. The country shares borders to the north and west with Thailand, to the northeast with Laos and to the east with Vietnam. The south of the country has a long and beautiful coastline on the Gulf of Thailand. Cambodia covers an area of 181,035 sq km, which is about half the size of Germany. Water is a dominant feature of the Cambodian landscape and the mighty Mekong River cuts through the country from north to south. Cambodia is also home to the Tonle Sap (Great Lake), Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake and a rich source of fish.

There are three main mountainous regions in the country. The Elephant and Cardamom Mountains are in the southwest, the Dangrek Mountains form the northern border with Thailand, and the Eastern Highlands rise towards the Laotian and Vietnamese borders.

History

The history of Cambodia has been profoundly influenced by its location midway between the two great cultures of India and China. Indian traders brought their great religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, their written languages, Sanskrit and Pali, and their sculpture and arts. The Chinese brought their scholars and diplomats who were the first to record the emerging kingdoms of the Funan period. Eventually these disparate kingdoms were united under the reign of Jayavarman II and Cambodia entered the golden age of Angkor. Jayavarman II proclaimed himself a devaraja (God king), the earthly representative of Shiva, in 802 and set about consolidating his kingdom. The capital settled at Angkor and from the 9th to the 13th centuries, the Khmer kings created the largest empire mainland Southeast Asia has ever seen.

rice paddy field



At its height it stretched from the borders of modern-day Burma in the west to the Mekong Delta in the east, from modern day Laos in the north to what is southern Thailand today. By the reign of Jayavarman VII in the late-12th century, Angkor had a population of almost one million when London was a city of just 40,000. However, disaster was lurking in the wings. Overpopulation, deforestation and siltation conspired to choke the vast hydraulic system that helped fuel and feed the empire. Religious rivalry and dynastic intrigue sparked small-scale civil wars and ascendant neighbours began to conquer the outposts. Siam sacked Angkor several times, but in 1431 there was to be no recovery. The Khmer kings decided to relocate the capital to the area around Phnom Penh, strategically safer and closer to the old trade routes that had created the empire.

The period from the 15th to 19th centuries was a time of weakness and insecurity for Cambodia, as neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam grew more powerful. Cambodia was in danger of disappearing from the map until the French entered in 1863 and made the country a protectorate. The French did little to develop Cambodia's infrastructure during their 90 years of rule, but they did help the country to survive as a recognized entity and negotiated the successful return of Angkor and the western provinces from Siam (now Thailand).

Cambodia achieved independence in 1953 and enjoyed a long period of prosperity and stability. However, as the conflict in Vietnam began to escalate, Cambodia found itself sucked into the vortex. Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup in March 1970 and Lon Nol moved closer to the USA. Full scale civil war erupted: Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge on one side and Lon Nol and the Americans on the other. It was a bloody conflict with thousands killed on both sides, including many victims of US bombing. Eventually the Khmer Rouge came to power on 17 April 1975 and embarked on one of the most radical revolutions the world has ever seen. Cities were evacuated, money abolished and the clocks turned back to Year Zero in a complete break from the past.



← Bokor

Cambodia became a prison without walls. By the time of their overthrow in January 1979, millions of Cambodians were dead through execution, starvation, disease and overwork.

The Cambodian resistance and their Vietnamese allies took Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979 and set about rebuilding the shattered country. It was an almost impossible task thanks to a desperate famine and the geopolitics of the Cold War. A new phase of civil war rumbled on until 1991, when the United Nations successfully negotiated a peace agreement with all sides. Free elections were held in 1993 which saw the Cambodian People's Party and Funcinpec form a coalition which has continued in one form or another until today. Cambodia became a member of ASEAN in 1999 and joined the WTO in 2005.

People & Culture

The last census in Cambodia in 1998 put the population at 11.8 million people. However, the today's figure is likely to be about 15 million. About 40% of the population is under the age of 15. The majority of people in Cambodia are ethnic Khmer and have inhabited this area since the beginning of recorded history. There are also significant populations of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese in Cambodia, some who have been here for several generations. There is also a large population of Cham Muslims in the provinces around Phnom Penh.

Cambodia is also home to a diverse population of chunchiets (ethnolinguistic minorities) who traditionally live in the country's remote mountainous regions in the northeast. Today, there are about sixty to seventy thousand minority people, including the *Kreung* and *Jarai* in Ratanakiri and the *Prong* in Mondul

Language

The official language of Cambodia is Khmer (Cambodian), spoken by the vast majority of the population. Derived from the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, written Khmer can be traced back to the 6th century when the first inscriptions appeared on temples.

English is the most popular international language and is widely spoken in urban centres. French was the language of choice in the 1950s and 1960s and many older Cambodians still speak some. Chinese and Vietnamese are quite widely understood among those populations, as well as some Lao or Thai in areas near the Lao and Thai borders.

Religion

Theravada Buddhism is the leading religion in Cambodia and defines the lives of many Khmers. Buddhism and other religions suffered

greatly during the Khmer Rouge period, but in the past decade there has been a dramatic resurgence in religious worship with Buddhism once again leading the way. Hinduism flourished alongside Buddhism from the 1st century AD until the 14th century and some cultural elements of this ancient Indian religion are still incorporated into important ceremonies involving birth, marriage and death.

There is also a significant minority of Cham and Malay people who practise Islam, as well as a very small number of Christians.

Economy

The Cambodian economy is small compared with some of its neighbours, but it has been growing rapidly in recent years. Before the civil war, rubber was a major industry and this is once again being redeveloped.

Tourism is the biggest industry in Cambodia today and the temples of Angkor are now attracting around two million visitors a year, including domestic tourists. The garment sector is another big industry. Cambodia has succeeded in carving out a niche for itself as an ethical producer with good labour conditions. Other up and coming industries in Cambodia include mineral exploitation and oil and gas exploration.

Angkor Buddhist monks



Festivals and Events

The festivals of Cambodia follow the lunar calendar, so the dates vary from year to year. Some of the most important festivals include:

Late January or early February

Chinese New Year – The Chinese community celebrates its new year with dragon dances in the streets of Phnom Penh and many businesses close for a few days. This is Tet to the Vietnamese who also let loose for several days.

Mid-April

Chaul Chnam – Khmer New Year is the most important festival in the Cambodian calendar, like Christmas, New Year and birthdays all rolled into one. Held in mid-April, this three-day celebration often extends to a week. Cambodians make offerings at wats, clean their homes and plaster each other in water and talc throughout the country.

Early-May

Chat Preah Nengkal – The Royal Ploughing ceremony is a ritual agricultural festival in which the royal oxen determine whether it will be a good harvest or a bad one. It takes place in front of the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

Water Festival



Royal Ploughing Festival

Late-May, early-June

Visakha Puja – This celebrates Buddha's birth, enlightenment and parinibbana (passing in nirvana). The festival falls on the eighth day of the fourth moon and is best seen at Angkor Wat, where there is a candle-lit processions of monks.

Mid-September or early October

P'chum Ben – This festival is a kind of All Souls' Day, when respects are paid to dead relatives through offerings made at wats.

Late-October or early-November

Bon Om Tuk – This festival commemorates Jayavarman VII's victory over the Chams in 1177 and the reversal of the Tonle Sap river. This is one of the most important festivals in the Khmer calendar and a lively time to be in Phnom Penh or Siem Reap.

Nature

About one quarter of Cambodia is made up of protected areas and national parks. Four national parks regularly draw visitors for their combination of natural attractions and activities: vast Virachey, in the far northeast, spanning Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces; Kirirom, just off the road to Sihanoukville, famous for its pine forests; Ream, a maritime park near Sihanoukville, with idyllic tropical beaches; and beautiful Bokor, a former French hill station near Kampot. The Cardamom Mountain range now includes the biggest protected area in Cambodia and has a lot of potential for ecotourism activities. Some environmentalists contend that Cambodia's may have a biodiversity of species as rich as any in Asia. There has been little study of the country's flora and fauna due to the long years of conflict.

The country's large mammals include tigers, leopards, bears, elephants, wild cows and deer, although precise numbers are uncertain. The many bird species in the country include cormorants, cranes, kingfishers and pelicans. Keen birders can see a number of very rare water birds in Cambodia. Popular places include the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary, which is home to rare water birds such as lesser and greater adjutants, milky storks and spot-billed pelicans, as well as Ang Trapeng Thmor in Banteay Meanchey province, home to the sarus crane.

The Mekong is second only to the Amazon in fish biodiversity and provides a home for one of the world's largest freshwater fish, the three metre long giant catfish. The rare freshwater Irrawaddy dolphin also inhabits stretches of the Mekong north of Kratie.

Nature

The Royal Government of Cambodia strongly supports the growth of the tourism sector in Cambodia. The government operates an open skies policy to encourage visitors to the kingdom. Tourism investment is positively encouraged and not just in the popular centres of Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville, but throughout the country. With a large network of national parks, the more remote areas of Cambodia have potential for ecotourism which the government plans to encourage in cooperation with international conservation organisations.

Cambodia also has a rich cultural heritage which draws many people to the country. Ancient temples dot the landscape and have the potential to encourage visitors to book longer stays. Living culture in the form of Cambodian dance, music and arts is also staging a strong comeback which the government supports.

Cambodia hosts a wide spectrum of NGOs working with the Cambodian government to alleviate poverty. The Cambodian government supports pro-poor tourism which seeks to channel the benefits of tourism to some of the most disenfranchised communities in the kingdom. Sustainable tourism can bring many benefits to the people of Cambodia and the government fully supports responsible tourism initiatives throughout the country.



Paddy near Sambor Preah Kuuk



Visas & Border Crossings

Most nationalities receive a one-month visa on arrival at Phnom Penh and Siem Reap airports, as well as at most of the popular land crossings. At the time of printing, the visa costs US\$20 and one passport-sized photo is required. It is also possible to arrange a Cambodian visa through Cambodian embassies overseas or an online e-visa through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:
<http://evisa.mfaic.gov.kh/>

Anyone planning a long stay in the kingdom should get a one-month business visa for US\$25, which is easily extendable.

Cambodia shares international border crossings with Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Cambodia shares one border crossing with Laos at Dom Kralor/Voen Kham, connecting Stung Treng province in northern Cambodia with Champasak province in southern Laos.

Cambodia shares six international crossings with Thailand, although only those at Poipet/Aranyaprathet, connecting Bangkok and Siem Reap, and Koh Kong/Hat Lek, connecting Trat and Koh Kong, are regularly used by foreigners. The other four crossings are: O Smach/Chong Jom, connecting Thailand's Surin Province to the remote town of Samraong; Choam/Choam Srawngam, linking Anlong Veng with Si Saket; Psar Pruhm/Ban Pakard, which links Pailin and Chantaburi; and Daun Lem/Ban Laem connecting Battambang province and Chantaburi.

There are three border crossings with Vietnam. The most popular road crossing is via Bavet/Moc Bai, connecting Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City. The Kaam Samnor/Vinh Xuong crossing is a popular option, connecting Phnom Penh and Chau Doc via the Mekong River. Finally, there is the little used border at



Mekong River transport

Phnom Den/Tinh Bien, connecting Takeo and Chau Doc.

Visa extensions are granted in Phnom Penh. Tourist visas can be extended only once for one month, whereas business visas can be extended for up to one year at a time. Visit the Immigration Office opposite Phnom Penh International Airport to arrange an extension.

Getting There & Away

Cambodia has two international gateways, Phnom Penh International Airport and Siem Reap International Airport. Cambodia has regular air links with its Southeast Asian neighbours, including connections to Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, South Korea and Taiwan. Departure tax when leaving by air is US\$25.



Basic Vocabulary

Suor s'dei - Hello
Lia suhn hao-y - goodbye
Aw kohn - Thank you
Somh toh - I'm sorry

Local Time

Cambodia is seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC.

Working Hours

Government offices are usually open at 0730, break for a siesta from 1130 to 1400 and end the day at 1700. Some government offices are also open on Saturday mornings. Banking hours vary slightly depending on the bank, but standard weekday hours are 0830 to 1530. Most are usually open Saturday mornings.

Keeping Healthy

It is important to look after your health in Cambodia due to poor sanitation and only limited access to international standard medical facilities. If you fall sick during your stay, try to see a doctor rather than visit a



hospital. Hospitals are pretty primitive and diagnosis can be erratic. If you fall seriously ill in Cambodia you should return to Phnom Penh, as it is the best place in the country for emergency treatment. If it is a very serious incident, a medivac to Bangkok may be required and for this reason it is important to have travel/health insurance before visiting Cambodia.

Pharmacies in urban centres are generally well stocked and prescriptions aren't necessary for most antibiotics. Prices are very reasonable, but do check the expiry date, as some medicine may have expired.

There's no need to be paranoid. While there are quite a lot of tropical diseases out there, the most common ailments to affect visitors to Cambodia are simple things like an upset stomach or a spot of dehydration. Avoiding tap water and drinking lots of bottled water is a good first step towards a healthy trip. Ice is generally considered safe, as it is mostly produced in factories.

French market - Phnom Penh



Money

Cambodia's currency is the riel. The riel comes in notes with the following values: 50r, 100r, 200r, 500r, 1000r, 2000r, 5000r, 10,000r, 20,000r, 50,000r and 100,000r. US dollars are widely accepted in Cambodia and Thai baht can be used in the west of the country.

There are now US dollar ATMs in most major cities including Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Sihanoukville, Battambang and Kompong Cham. Cash advances on credit cards are now available in major cities for those needing larger sums of money. Try Canadia Bank or ANZ Royal Bank. Most banks can cash travellers cheques and charge a 2% commission.

Bargaining is an acceptable practice in Cambodia in some situations, like shopping in markets, hiring vehicles and, sometimes, when taking a room. However, bargaining is not necessarily about getting the lowest possible price, but a price that is acceptable to both the buyer and the seller. Remember to keep the exchange friendly at all times.

Emergency Contact Numbers

General emergency telephone numbers in Cambodia are:

Ambulance
119

Fire
118

Police
117



Embassies & Consulates

The following embassies are found in Phnom Penh (telephone code 023):

Australia
Phone: 213470; 11 St 254

Canada
Phone: 213470; 11 St 254

China
Phone : 720920; 256 Mao Tse Toung Blvd

Cuba
128 Ban Saphanthong Neua, Vientiane
Phone : 312 904

France
Phone : 430020; 1 Monivong Blvd

Germany
Phone : 216381; 76-78 St 214

Laos
Phone : 982632; 15-17 Mao Tse Toung Blvd

Malaysia
Phone : 216177; 5 St 242

Singapore
Phone : 221875; 92 Norodom Blvd

Thailand
Phone : 726306; 196 Norodom Blvd

UK
Phone : 427124; 29 St 75

USA
Phone : 728000; 1 St 96

Vietnam
Phone : 362531; 436 Monivong Blvd

In Phnom Penh, there are two 24-hour emergency numbers for the police (023-366841, 012-999999) that should connect with English-speaking officers.

☉ The emergency numbers for Phnom Penh's ambulance service are 023-724891, 023-426948 & 012-808915.

☉ The best medical facilities in Phnom Penh include:

- Calmette Hospital (023-426948; 3 Monivong Blvd)
- SOS International Medical Centre (023-216911; 161 St 51)
- European Dental Clinic (023-211363; 160A Norodom Blvd).

☉ In Siem Reap, there is a tourist police office (012-969991) at the main ticket checkpoint for the Angkor area.

The best medical facility in Siem Reap is the Royal Angkor International Hospital (063-761888; www.royalangkorhospital.com; Airport Rd), affiliated to the Bangkok Hospital.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

The following three paragraphs will be replaced. The last census in Cambodia in 1998 put the population at 11.8 million people. However, the today's figure is likely to be about 15 million. About 40% of the population is under the age of 15.

The majority of people in Cambodia are ethnic Khmer and have inhabited this area since the beginning of recorded history. There are also significant populations of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese in Cambodia, some who have been here for several generations. There is also a large population of Cham Muslims in the provinces around Phnom Penh.

Cambodia is also home to a diverse population of chunchiets (ethnolinguistic minorities) who traditionally live in the country's remote mountainous regions in the northeast. Today, there are about sixty to seventy thousand minority people, including the Kreung and Jarai in Ratanakiri and the Phong in Mondulakiri. End of dummy three pars.



☉ *Stilt village - Tonle Sap*





Cambodia Activities

A Guide to Responsible Tourism

LAOS

THAILAND

VIETNAM



Legend Country map:

- Main Road
- Road number
- Railroads
- Town
- Main rivers
- Activities
- Airport
- International border crossing
- Provincial border




Elevation

0
1 - 200
201 - 400
401 - 600
601 - 800
801 - 1200
1201 - 1400
1401 - 1800

0 25 50 100 150 Kilometers

Siam Golf

Inside Cambodia by Bike

-  **Activity:** PEPY – Protect the Earth, Protect Yourself
-  **Location:** Cambodia
-  **Tip:** Moderate to good fitness levels required if bicycling

Discover the back roads of Angkor and beyond on bicycle, or take a volunteer trip to a rural home with stops to see health, environmental or education projects

The experience: PEPY (Protect the Earth, Protect Yourself) organizes adventure and volunteer tours for travellers who want to give something back while they explore Cambodia. PEPY cycling tours operate during the dry season from November to March and they offer a range of trips from one to three weeks. The trips cover the highlights of Cambodia, including the majestic temples of Angkor and the enigmatic capital of Phnom Penh. But they also cover some of the roads less travelled, including a taste of local life and some undiscovered temples. People looking for a real adventure can join one of PEPY's cross-Cambodia cycling trips, exploring the country's backroads.

On the road to Phom Penh



A friendly graduation

Others who prefer a less-challenging experience can join a volunteer trip, some of which offer the opportunity for an overnight stay in a rural home. The trips also offer educational opportunities through visits to health, environmental and education projects in Cambodia. PEPY also offers non-cycling 'voluntours' throughout the year for those that want to get more involved in helping Cambodia. These range from building rainwater collection units at schools to health education initiatives in rural villages.

How it helps: PEPY is a non-profit organisation uniting tourism and development to improve educational opportunities in rural Cambodia. All PEPY tours include volunteer opportunities. Funds raised by the tours support PEPY's ongoing educational programmes. Participants on PEPY cycling tours include stops at rural schools to teach environmental lessons in conjunction with local teachers and PEPY staff.

PEPY's development programmes range from building schools and literacy programs to the Bike-To-School programme, providing bikes to students in rural areas in order to increase access to distant secondary schools. To date, PEPY has built a primary school in Kralanh district in Siem Reap and a secondary school in Stung Treng in northeast Cambodia. In addition to the Cambodian curriculum, PEPY supports English, computer and organic farming classes. PEPY has also introduced a library and literacy programme to encourage a thirst for reading and access to Khmer language literature.

Contact information

Daniela Papi
 Address: PO Box 1235
 Tel: (+855) 2322 2804 or (+1) 914 458 4262
 E-mail: teamleader@pepyride.org
 Web: www.pepyride.org

Carving Out a Better Future

 Activity: Artisans D'Angkor.

 Location: Siem Reap.

 Tip: Worldwide shipping can be organised.

Encourage the revival of traditional Khmer arts and crafts with a visit to the Artisans workshop in Siem Reap.

The experience: Artisans D'Angkor established its Chantiers Ecoles (Skills Development Workshops) in 1999 and has since been a key player in the rebirth of traditional crafts in the Angkor area. Working with young artisans, the team create, produce and market a unique collection of ornamental sculpture, lacquerware, silk weaving and silk painting. Local materials, natural colours and traditional textures are selected to ensure these exquisite products reflect Cambodia's historical traditions.

The Chantiers Ecoles centre welcomes visitors daily between 0730 and 1730. Former students conduct free guided tours of the workshops, offering an intimate insight into traditional handicraft skills. Guides are available in several languages, including English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese.

Stone carving



Silk weaving

Visitors can witness intricate wood and stone carving, lacquering, gilding and silk painting. There is a lavish onsite boutique with an extensive range of beautiful products, open until 1830 daily.

Visitors with an interest in traditional textiles will relish a visit to the Angkor Silk Farm, located in Pouk District about 11 km west of Siem Reap. Here it is possible to experience the entire silk process from the cultivation of mulberry trees through the nurturing of silk worms to the preparation of silk thread for weaving.

Free tours are available daily between 0700 and 1700 and a free shuttle bus runs here from Les Chantiers Ecoles at 0930 and 1330. The silk boutique includes classic clothing, items of interior design and smaller keepsakes like wallets and purses.

As well as these flagship workshops, Artisans D'Angkor also maintains a number of boutiques in Cambodia and beyond. The Angkor Café is located opposite the Western Causeway to Angkor Wat and is an air-conditioned retreat after exploring the world's largest religious building.

There is an extensive collection of crafts on display, as well as a small café with shakes, cakes and homemade ice cream. Artisans D'Angkor also showcases its style in boutiques in both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap International Airports, as well as in a newer gallery in Hong Kong International Airport. There are also plans to open a new boutique in the Angkor National Museum complex.



Wood carving

How it helps: Artisans d'Angkor is a Cambodian company committed to the revival and preservation of traditional arts and crafts. The company promotes fair, sustainable development in order to provide benefits to the rural communities around Siem Reap. The programme includes extensive training of young Cambodians in the arts of their ancestors to enable them to develop a talent to make a successful living. It encourages students to use these skills at home, enabling them to stay in their villages instead of migrating to the cities.

The Artisans initiative has already created more than 1,000 jobs for young Cambodians, about 600 of which are in the arts and crafts sector. There are currently 12 workshops operating in the Siem Reap area.

Young Cambodians join the programme after taking a series of skill and motivation tests and are trained for at least six months, free of charge. Artisans d'Angkor is also committed to responsible employment and has pioneered a new social policy for Siem Reap with

guaranteed levels of pay and social and medical benefits for employees. The artisans operate an association called Artisanat Khmer which owns 20% of the company, offering employees a voice in the decision-making process.

Artisans d'Angkor has created opportunities for hundreds of rural Cambodians by successfully marketing their skills and products to a wider international audience. The Artisans project has reinvigorated Khmer crafts and has uncovered an ancient pool of artisans whose ancestors gave the world the temples of Angkor.

Ultimately, Artisans d'Angkor strives to help build the pride of the Cambodian people in their cultural roots. The team aims to develop a sense of well-being, dignity and self-esteem. Providing a stable income and a rewarding, sustainable environment to work are part of the picture.




Location and contact information


Les Chantiers Ecoles
Stung Thmey St, BP 47, Siem Reap, Cambodia
Tel: (+855) [0] 63 963 330
E-mail: infos@artisansdangkor.com
Web: www.artisansdangkor.com

Paris boutique
Galerie Jayavarman VII
17 rue de L'Échaudé, Paris, France
Tel.: 01 47 41 09 02
www.galerie-j7.com

A Café that Cares

 Activity: Café Yejj.

 Location: Phnom Penh.

 Tip: The perfect place to recharge the batteries after a shopping trip to the Russian Market.

Enjoy fair-trade coffee and organic ingredients in this bistro café that aims to provide employment and training for Cambodia's disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

The experience: Café Yejj is a popular bistro café near Psar Tuol Tom Pong (Russian Market), one of the most popular shopping stops in Phnom Penh. With pastel shades and wrought-iron furnishings, this is an air-conditioned oasis from the hustle and bustle beyond. The café serves a wide range of international snacks and dishes, including pastas, salads and wraps, all prepared to a high level of hygiene. Creative coffees and healthy shakes are a popular option. Café Yejj provides employment and skills training for underprivileged people, especially women from vulnerable backgrounds.

A quiet atmosphere



The terrace of the Café

How it helps: The long-term goal of Café Yejj, as well as providing customers with top quality food and service, is to establish a socially responsible yet profitable business. As well as providing job opportunities to young, underprivileged people, Café Yejj tries to develop employable skills for the future and promote ethical lifestyles to help break the cycle of poverty.

Employees train in the café while working in the kitchen and as waiting staff. They learn about the value of teamwork and are encouraged to contribute positively to the running of the café. Café Yejj particularly seeks to promote opportunities for Cambodian women to help raise their profile in credible business and employment situations. The day-to-day running of the café is handed by local Cambodian staff, with outside management working with them to improve the overall standard of service and experience. All tips are shared among café staff, encouraging a sense of ownership in the business.

Café Yejj also strives to contribute positively to the community and environment by supporting locally-owned, locally-operated companies and enterprises wherever possible for staffing, supplies and food. This includes using organic ingredients, where possible, sourced from local growers around Phnom Penh, and promoting fair trade coffee to support community initiatives for growers and their families.

Contact information

Address: 170 St 450, Tuol Tom Pong, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel: (+855) [0] 12 543 60


E-mail: cafe@yejj.net

Web: www.yejj.com

Fighting an Underground War

 Activity: Cambodia Landmine Museum.

 Location: Siem Reap.

 Tip: Experience the mock minefield to discover how difficult it would be to live in a mine-infested area.



An unexploded ordnance

Learn more about the scourge of landmines and the shadow they cast over rural communities in Cambodia with a visit to this flagship museum that promotes mine awareness and education.

The experience: The Landmine Museum tells the terrible story of landmines and UXO (unexploded ordnance) in Cambodia. Cambodia has been scarred by years of conflict and some of the deepest scars lie just inches beneath the surface. These invisible enemies within the soil of the land have killed and maimed many thousands of Cambodians in the past few decades. Landmines continue to pose a threat to innocent civilians trying to get on with their lives.

Anywhere between four and eight million landmines may have been deployed in Cambodia during the long years of conflict from 1970 to 1998. Many mines have been removed by various demining organizations, but there are still millions still scattered across the countryside. Landmines and UXO will continue to be a blight on development until they are all removed. Tragically, discovery often means an innocent civilian, often a child, losing a leg.

Mines in the grass



The Landmine Museum displays a large collection of weapons of war, including guns, rifles, rocket launchers, mortars, bombs and landmines. The site includes a mocked-up minefield where visitors can attempt to locate the deactivated mines. The museum is a rich resource of information about landmines and UXO with many educational displays detailing how certain mines are used, and in what situations. There is also a DVD available telling the story of landmines and UXO in Cambodia and the disastrous impact they have had on the population. Not only a weapon during war, mines kill in times of peace.

Aki Ra is the founder of the Cambodia Landmine Museum and National Project Manager for the Cambodia Landmine Museum Relief Fund (CLMMRF), the NGO behind the museum. His mother and father were killed during the Pol Pot regime and he was forced to live in a Khmer Rouge camp for children. At just ten, he was given his first rifle and spent the next two decades involved in the civil war. During that time, landmines became his best friend; they protected him, helped him to catch food and even helped to save his life on a number of occasions when the war was at its fiercest.

In the early 1990s Aki Ra received training as a deminer. He had already learnt much about landmines and ordnance having laid hundreds of mines and booby traps as a soldier. He began receiving requests from villagers around the country, and has been working to help clear mines ever since.

Aki Ra purchased some land along the river just outside Siem Reap in 1997. He built a series of shacks to store his growing collection of shell casings and decommissioned mines.



Bombies

In 1998, Aki Ra opened his doors to show the collection to the hundreds of tourists who were flocking to visit the temples of Angkor. His home quickly evolved to become the Cambodia Landmine Museum. The museum soon began to serve as a rescue centre for a number of amputee children. As the museum grew, so did the number of children that came to live at the museum.

Soon journalists, filmmakers and TV crews were coming from all over the world to document his work as news spread about the museum. Time Magazine, CNN, BBC, NTV (Japan), CBC (Canada), have all featured the Cambodia Landmine Museum.

The new Cambodia Landmine Museum is located in a purpose-built centre near Banteay Srei. It is located about 6 km south of Banteay Srei on the right-hand side of the road. Admission is US\$1 and it is open from 0700 to 1800 daily.



How it helps: The CLMMRF is registered as a NGO with both the Canadian and Cambodian governments and serves to provide financial legitimacy for the Landmine Museum. The goals of the CLMMRF are to maintain the Landmine Museum in Cambodia for the purpose of promoting landmine accident prevention awareness and public education, and to provide educational facilities, programming and rehabilitation facilities for survivors of landmine injuries. The CLMMRF is able to fund projects with grants from organizations such as The Cottonwood Foundation (USA) and The Tides Foundation (USA), as well as from online donations.

The new Landmine Museum contains a school, an orphanage for up to 30 at-risk children, a medical clinic that serves as a rehabilitation centre, and a training facility for landmine accident prevention and safety. It also provides employment opportunities for several teachers and local Khmers who play an important part in the Landmine Museum family. Moreover, it is a place for action, serving as a launch pad for humanitarian and landmine relief initiatives.

Contact information


Banteay Srei District, Siem Reap Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) (0) 12 598 951
E-mail: info@cambodiaminelandmine.org

Web: www.cambodiaminelandmine.org
Open from 0700 to 1800 daily.

Enjoy Nature to Protect Nature

 Activity: Chambok Community-based Ecotourism.

 Location: Cambodia.

 Tip: Bring swimwear for a dip in the waterfall.



Local guide

Discover the natural beauty of rural Cambodia with a visit to a pioneering ecotourism site half way between Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville.

The experience: The Chambok Community-based Ecotourism site is home to a beautiful waterfall amid a lush area of natural forest. Chambok is set in a striking landscape near Kirirom National Park and offers the perfect opportunity to experience rural life in Cambodia. The 40-metre high waterfall is the main attraction for visitors and is accessible via a 3.5 km nature trail. Trained local guides can accompany visitors along the trail and are happy to share their knowledge on the natural environment. There is also a visitors' centre with a local restaurant serving traditional Khmer food.

It is possible to visit Chambok on a day trip from Phnom Penh or as a stopover when travelling between the Cambodian capital and the beach resort of Sihanoukville.

Waterfall



Some visitors prefer to stay longer, experiencing a homestay with a local family. Other activities available for longer stay guests include trekking, bird watching and animal tracking, ox cart riding, and visiting a bat cave. Chambok is about 108 km southwest from Phnom Penh, accessible via the turnoff to Kirirom National Park, at km 88 on national road no 4. Entrance fees are US\$3 for foreign adults, US\$1 for children and 1,000R for Cambodians. Overnight stays and meals for larger groups should be booked in advance. Weekends are the most popular time to visit, so come during the week if you are seeking solitude.

How it helps: The ecotourism site is managed by the villagers of Chambok commune and all tourism revenues stay in the community. Chambok received about 13,000 visitors in 2006, including almost 500 international tourists. The income generated from visitors helps the people of Chambok protect their forest. The commune has nine villages and about 3,000 inhabitants.

The income from the entrance fees is used to pay wages of service providers, to fund forest patrols and other measures to preserve the forest, as well as for maintenance of the site. What remains goes into a development fund to be used for activities that benefit the whole community.

Between 5% and 10% of income is contributed to the community development fund. Chambok now serves as a model of best practice in community-based ecotourism in Cambodia.

Contact information


Mlup Baitong
37B, St 113, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Tel: (+855) [0] 23 214 409
E-mail: chambokcbet@yahoo.com or
mlup@online.com.kh

Further information on Chambok Community-based Ecotourism can be found at:
www.geocities.com/chambokcbet/

Painting a Brighter Picture

 **Activity:** Cambodian Children's Painting Project.

 **Location:** Sihanoukville, southern Cambodia.

 **Tip:** Arrange a visit to meet some of the young artists in person.



The painting studio

Add a splash of colour to a visit to Cambodia's leading beach resort and help create a brighter future for underprivileged children through creativity and artistic expression.

The experience: The Cambodian Children's Painting Project runs the Serendip Children's Art Gallery, a studio and exhibition space on Ochheuteal Beach, Sihanoukville, showcasing a range of children's paintings. There are about 100 children participating in the project and they have created more 8,000 paintings in the last three years. The project has proved very popular with visiting tourists. Visitors are able to purchase original works of art, make friends with the children. Some visitors even sponsor further education for one or more child. The Painting Project is a registered NGO which aims to support the well-being and future success of each child. Being the number one beach resort in Cambodia, the welfare of these

A splash of colour



children on the beach is of special importance for the future of tourism in the country.

How it helps: The Cambodian Children's Painting Project is a registered non-governmental organization (NGO). It provides a cultural and social foundation for the beach children of Sihanoukville. They are between five and 15 years old and they fall into many categories: orphans who have lost one or both parents, children who are living with uncaring or abusive parents or relatives, and children from families that do not have the means to provide proper care.

The Painting Project provides a balanced meal each day, provides medical and dental care, and offers a friendly, positive environment for the children. Paintings sell for US\$4 each. The young artist receives US\$2 and the other US\$2 covers organisational expenses. The project uses locally purchased materials, including oil based paints and wooden panels.

The project aims to mentor these young beach children and continues to work on their good behaviour and honesty through adult supervision, guidance and care. The project also helps build bridges for foreigners wanting to sponsor a child to go to a private school to learn English.


The aim is to give the children a creative perspective, a safe environment and a positive chance to develop their intelligence and skills. The children have greatly enhanced self-esteem and now form a much more friendly and cohesive group.

Contact information

Roger Dixon
Serendip Children's Art Gallery, Serendipity Beach,
Sihanoukville
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 361 626
E-mail: ccpproject@gmail.com
Web: www.artcambodia.org

Enabling Disabled Arts

 Activity: Epic Arts Café.

 Location: Kampot, southern Cambodia.

 Tip: Pack a picnic here for an adventurous day trip to Bokor National Park.



Learning sign, sharing a smile

A lively little café provides a focal point for the deaf and disabled community in Kampot. The café helps fund art programmes to integrate them into society.

The experience: The Epic Arts Café opened in 2006 and has earned a name for itself thanks to a tempting selection of light bites, homemade cakes and brownies, super shakes and gourmet teas and coffees. A new speciality is Kampot pepper bread. The café is a welcome retreat for tourists in Kampot who are looking for some comfort food, as well as an essential stop to prepare a picnic before undertaking an adventure to the abandoned hill station of Bokor.

The café provides a home for Epic Arts' dance, drama, puppetry and craft workshops, which aim to change people's attitudes towards disability.

A dance show at the Epic Arts Café



The café has become a focal point for the deaf community in Kampot and encourages tourists to learn sign language. The café has deaf and disabled staff and aims to be a welcome stop off for tourists, a place to hang out for the deaf and disabled community, and an environment where all are welcome. This is at the heart of the Epic Arts' philosophy: the integration of disability within society.

The Epic Arts Café is located on Osaphea Street, just a short distance from the Kampot riverfront. It is open daily from 0700 to 1800. As well as a hearty selection of food and drinks, the café also sells homemade cards and handicrafts produced by deaf and disabled members of the community.

How it helps: The Epic Arts café is part of Epic Arts, an arts charity that was set up in the UK in 2001. The Cambodian branch was established in 2003 to nurture the talents of the disabled community, who often find opportunities limited in everyday life.

The café provides employment to six local deaf and disabled staff and serves as a successful model of an inclusive working environment to the local community. Members of the deaf community visit the café daily to meet foreigners and attend the regular art, puppetry and movement workshops in the performing space above the café.

All profits from the café go towards materials for the arts workshops provided for children by the deaf and disabled communities.


Contact information

Roath Leakhena
67, 1 Osaphea St, Kampot, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 33 932 247
E-mail: epicarts@camintel.com
Web: www.epicarts.co.uk

The Best of Friends

 **Activity:** Friends cafes and charity shop.

 **Location:** Phnom Penh.

 **Tip:** The fried spiders at Romdeng aren't filling enough to make a meal.

Creative tapas or Asian fusion, classic Khmer or bistro French, the Friends group has created a wonderful selection of restaurants to help former street children into the work place.

The experience: Friends International has created an outstanding group of restaurants that help street children return to their families, enrol at school or find employment. In Phnom Penh there are three training restaurants, Friends the Restaurant, Romdeng, and Cafe du Centre, all run by former street youth and their teachers. There are also several retail outlets selling products made by youth in training to help them find employment, including Friends 'n' Stuff and Friends@240. These outlets also sell products made by parents of former street youth, so the children can go back to school instead of working on the streets.

- *Friends the Restaurant.* This has become a Phnom Penh landmark thanks to its eclectic menu and fine service. A non-profit restaurant run by former street youths in training, Friends offers a selection of Asian and Western tapas dishes, and a range of weekly specials. Favourites include fish with salsa verde and Cambodian chicken curry. Creative cocktails and sublime shakes include exotic Daiquiris and Margaritas, as well as mixed berry smoothies. Their motto is fair price, fun atmosphere, Khmer smiles. Friends is nearly always full. Bookings are advisable. Look out for their lavishly illustrated cook book, the Best of Friends.

Outreach of reading



Kid reading alphabet

- *Romdeng.* For the taste of Cambodia's Provinces, Romdeng provides an authentic journey through countryside cuisine. Also a non-profit restaurant run by former street children, this is the place to sample unusual flavours such as prahoc (fermented fish paste) and deep fried spiders.

- *Cafe du Centre.* Le Café du Centre is located in the beautiful gardens of the French Cultural Centre and is a world away from the non-stop action of nearby Monivong Boulevard. The cafe offers a French-accented bistro menu of crêpes, salads, cakes and ice cream. Many of the hospitality students from Friends training centre work here. Bon appétit.

- *Friends 'n' Stuff.* This is the closest thing to a charity shop or thrift store in Phnom Penh, with a good range of new and second-hand products sold to generate revenue for the Mith Samlanh Centre. The shop sells items repaired by students in mechanics and electronics training and goods designed and hand-crafted by students in sewing and welding training. There are also clothes, lamps, cushions, as well as second-hand books and DVDs. The Nail bar here offers manicures and pedicures and is run by the students in beauty training. Indulge yourself without feeling guilty, as it is all for a good cause.

- *Friends on 240.* The latest boutique in the Friends family. Selling clothes, jewellery and accessories, as well as soft toys for children. All products are made by former students of Friends or families of street children to enable their children to go back to school.





kid along the friend's wall

How it helps: Friends International believes that it is possible to build a world where no child or young person has to live or work on the streets. Friends aims to prevent children from coming to the streets by providing them an alternative to street life with various projects. By working directly with families, Friends helps them to increase their own incomes so that their children do not need to work on the streets and can instead go to school. Friends develops and supports creative, sustainable projects that allow children to become independent and productive members of their society.

Friends International works with street children in Cambodia through its partner, Mith Samlanh, which was established in Phnom Penh by Friends International in 1994 and offers food, shelter, medical care, training and educational facilities for more than 1,800 homeless or abandoned children each day.



Older students are provided with vocational training in a variety of practical areas such as motor mechanics, beauty therapy, welding, electrical training, laundry and hospitality. Once they have completed their training, they are supported to find employment.

Each year, Friends International supports about 120,000 street children worldwide. Last year, in Phnom Penh alone, Friends helped 200 students complete their vocational training and find employment; 620 students were supported to return to their studies; around 80,000 medical consultations were provided; and 240,000 meals prepared.

All Friends businesses are supported by locals and tourists and proceeds from these businesses go back to the projects to ensure long-term sustainability.

Location & contact information

Friends Restaurant
215, Street 13, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 802 702
E-mail: info@friends-international.org
Web: www.friends-international.org
Open daily 1100-2100

Romdeng Restaurant
21, Street 278, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 92 219 565
Open Monday to Saturday 1100-1400 and 1800-2100.
Closed Sunday.


Café du Centre
French Cultural Centre, Street 184, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 92 219 565
Open daily 0800-2100.


Friends & Stuff
215, St 13, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 23 426 748
Open Monday to Friday 1200-2100, Saturday
0900-1800. Closed Sunday.

Friends on 240
32, Street 240, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 673 078
Open Monday to Friday 0800-1700, Saturday
0800-1200. Closed Sunday.

Roads Less Travelled

 Activity: Hanuman Tourism.

 Location: Around Cambodia.

 Tip: Pack a travel pillow, as country roads can be rough.



The Bayon



Go on safari, Cambodia style, to discover the lost temples of the north in Cambodia's jungle and help contribute something to the local economy.

The experience: Hanuman Tourism is one of the longest running locally-owned, locally-operated travel companies in Cambodia. Established in the early days of tourism in 1990, Hanuman has consistently sought to encourage visitors to spend more time in the country, visiting not only the majestic temples of Angkor, the quixotic capital Phnom Penh and the blissful beaches of the south coast, but other less-travelled destinations such as Ratanakiri, Kratie and Battambang.

Hanuman Tourism developed the unique Temple Safari trip, using African-style bush tents to take visitors closer to the incredible lost temples of Preah Vihear, Koh Ker, Preah Khan, Preah Vihear and more, ensuring that visitors can reach these places in comfort and inject some money into the local economy. Hanuman is also one of the few local companies to arrange homestays in rural communities in Cambodia. These can be arranged in Phnom Kulen, in the floating villages of the Tonle Sap, and other parts of the country.



Cambodia from Preah Vihear

Hanuman has long supported responsible tourism initiatives and NGO-related projects throughout Cambodia. Every visitor who travels to Cambodia with Hanuman will be sure to experience the famous tapas of Friends when in Phnom Penh, visit the Artisans d'Angkor workshop in Siem Reap or catch a shadow puppet performance by Krousar Thmey or Sovanna Phum. But Hanuman takes it further by taking visitors deeper into the country. As an example, Hanuman is one of the very few companies to regularly send visitors to the Weaves of Cambodia workshop in Tbeng Meanchey, Preah Vihear.

In 2006, Hanuman's responsible tourism initiatives were taken to a new level with the creation of the Hanuman Foundation. Inspired by many guests asking 'How can we help?', Hanuman decided to provide a bridge between visitors and NGOs working in Cambodia. The Foundation began life with a donation of money from Hanuman Tourism itself. It is now sustained by an annual contribution, plus potential donations from visitors. The foundation aims to support local and international NGOs in a variety of fields, but focuses on projects where most of the money is directly going to assist the local population, be it education, healthcare or the revival of Cambodian arts.

How It helps: Like all travel agents, Hanuman Tourism brings much benefit to Cambodia by bringing visitors to the country and encouraging them to stay as long as possible, spreading their spending far and wide. However, Hanuman has taken this to a new level with several innovations over the years. Firstly Hanuman has always supported responsible tourism projects, ecotourism initiatives and NGO-related 'good cause' tourism. Hanuman understands how hard it can be to get these kind of projects up and running and is happy to direct its guests to well-run initiatives.



Kbal Spean

Hanuman has for a long time taken visitors deeper into Cambodia than most other travel companies. The Temple Safari takes visitors into the remote province of Preah Vihear for anything from two days to one week. The Temple Safari experience has been in operation for almost five years now and hundreds of visitors from around the world have been able to experience the remote temples for themselves. However, more than that, they have been able to contribute to a local economy that is almost non-existent.

Hanuman trips source as much of their food locally as possible, injecting much needed money into this remote area. Teams that help with set-up of the tents and supply of clean water are also locals from these remote areas, creating small job opportunities where none previously existed. When it comes to Preah Vihear Temple, this border has been closed several times due to disputes between Cambodia and Thailand. On the most recent occasion, Hanuman was the only company to continue to send guests there, not from the Thai side, but from the Cambodian side, a much needed lifeline during troubled times.

Tent at Preah Vihear



The Hanuman Foundation is also a direct tangible benefit to individual communities and grassroots projects in Cambodia. By providing the bridge between socially-conscious tourists and the NGO community in Cambodia, the Hanuman Foundation may, in time, make a big difference. Hanuman is currently supporting 12 projects or organisations in Cambodia and is constantly looking to add more.

Hanuman has also devised a series of educational visits to sites and projects in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and beyond. Visitors pay a fixed donation to each project and the hope is that a potential partnership will be established leading to further sponsorship. In time, the Foundation will develop initiatives of its own in Preah Vihear province, in consultation with experienced NGOs and local communities.

Hanuman Tourism is one of the only locally-owned, locally-operated travel company striving to make a difference. It is also one of the few companies committing money to good causes through donations to the Hanuman Foundation.


Contact information and booking

Hanuman Tourism
12 St 310, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 23 218 356
E-mail: info@hanumantourism.com
Web: www.hanumantourism.com
Hanuman Foundation:
www.hanumantourism.com/foundation

Respect the Bricks

 **Activity:** Heritage Watch.

 **Location:** Siem Reap area and nationwide.

 **Tip:** Look out for a great novel, *The Wrath of the Phantom Army*, which raises awareness about the importance of protecting Cambodia's cultural heritage.



Local people living near ancient sites

Dedicated to protecting Cambodia's rich culture, the Heritage Friendly Tourism Campaign is helping visitors and locals alike understand the need to preserve the past.

The experience. Heritage Watch was founded with the goal of preserving Cambodia's cultural heritage. It undertakes a number of grass-roots projects with this in mind. Most recently, Heritage Watch launched the Heritage Friendly Tourism Campaign in conjunction with the Ministry of Tourism. The campaign aims to create greater public awareness about Cambodia's fascinating heritage, to promote responsible tourism and encourage businesses to promote the arts, culture and heritage in Cambodia.

The aim of the Heritage Friendly Campaign is to promote responsible tourism, providing visitors with a set of guidelines on conduct that has a low impact on Cambodia's heritage resources. Billboards around the country promote the campaign and are supported by the free quarterly Touchstone magazine which covers the culture of Cambodia.

Cambodia's fascinating heritage



Businesses participating in the Heritage Friendly Tourism Campaign have met certain criteria. Certification ensures that they use Cambodian products where possible, patronize the arts, contribute financially to culture or heritage organisations, support social development projects in rural areas, promote Cambodia as a positive tourism destination, and do not participate in the antiquities trade.

How it helps: Supporting the Heritage Friendly Tourism Campaign helps to preserve Cambodia's fragile cultural heritage. Cambodia has experienced extensive looting in recent decades. Many ancient sites have been damaged beyond repair. Heritage Watch aims to ensure this tide is stemmed and that the Cambodian people become proactive in the preservation of their culture and heritage. This can be successfully done by linking heritage and tourism. The belief is that visitors provide an income which will benefit the local communities living near ancient sites. Local people will then have an incentive to protect the antiquities.

Heritage Watch is working at Koh Ker temple site to improve the lives of the local population. Training in small business management, tourism, language skills and culture is being provided and community patrols established to ensure the temples are not further damaged by looting. Increased tourism at the site will ensure the local community of Koh Ker benefits from an increase in visitor numbers.


Contact information

Dr Dougal O'Reilly
 Building B-C, Level 2,
 Phnom Penh Centre, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
 Tel: (+855) [0] 12 675 838
 E-mail: director@heritagewatch.org
 Web: www.heritagewatch.org

Luxury Hotel That Cares

 Activity: Hotel de la Paix.

 Location: Siem Reap.

 Tip: Experience innovative Khmer cuisine at the Meric restaurant.



Courtyard Garden

Enjoy traditional Cambodian hospitality in trendy surrounds at this cultured hotel that strives to build a bridge between visiting tourists and the Cambodian community beyond.

The experience: Possibly Siem Reap's hippest boutique hotel is the perfect base from which to explore the majestic temples of Angkor. Drawing on influences from the art deco period while acknowledging traditional Khmer design, Hotel de la Paix is a fashionable place to stay. Facilities include lavishly decorated rooms complete with open plan bathrooms and fully loaded ipods, as well as split-level duplex studios.

Facilities include the Spa Indochine to stimulate the mind and revive the body, as well as internationally-renowned dining outlets. The hotel is set around a striking courtyard complete with sumptuous sculpture in the Angkor style with elegant water features. Hotel de la Paix is located in the heart of Siem Reap and is just a ten minute drive from the temples of Angkor.

Hotel Facade



What sets the hotel apart from other boutique hotels and luxurious resorts in Siem Reap is a commitment to the local environment, the wider community and the region's culture. A stay at Hotel de la Paix is a way to help Siem Reap move in the right direction.

How it helps: Hotel de la Paix and its sister hotel, Shinta Mani, strive to make a difference in several ways. The most important is the Connecting Menu which helps establish a link between guests and community needs.

The hotel operates guest excursions to local farming communities and assists guests in providing sponsorship and support for community basics in the form of water wells, school supplies, bicycles and clothing. The Shinta Mani hotel also operates an Institute of Hospitality, which provides free hospitality industry training to young Khmer people 'at risk'.

The hotels also have close relationships with local orphanages and sewing centres. Hotel de la Paix supports The Life & Hope Association (LHA) and the Sangkheum Centre, as well as assisting the Sewing Centre at the LHA to produce silk products which are available for purchase in the gift shop.

The guestroom amenities include artefacts produced by a landmine NGO. The spa supports a masseuse from the Blind Institute and many of the items on display in the gift shop are produced by local organisations.

The hotel continues to support the community when the guest returns home. Many guests have seen the difference they can make and they want to do more. The hotel facilitates this after the guests have gone home.



The Arts Lounge with Installation

The hotel draws the majority of its staff from the local community and they are given top quality training in English language, communications, team building, fire prevention, first aid, HIV-AIDS awareness, health and hygiene. The hotel employs students from local training schools such as the Shinta Mani Institute of Hospitality, the Salabai School, and other NGOs.

The hotel monitors the effects of its programmes on the community through discussions with local NGOs, village and religious leaders. Audit requirements are met at the end of each month and are reported to the general manager and managing director.

Hotel de la Paix hosts a restaurant and café and extensive kitchen facilities for food production. The hotel, in conjunction with Bio-diesel Cambodia, recycles waste cooking oils into environmentally friendly bio-diesel fuel which is then used for electricity generation in remote rural areas.

The hotel procures most of its food produce from local farmers who practice organic agriculture and sustainable harvesting, including wild honey production and pepper harvesting. Only specialist foods are imported.

Rubbish separation is performed with both guest trash and kitchen refuse. Plastic, paper and tin cans are collected in bins and sent for local recycling. Eco-friendly laundry chemicals are used throughout the hotel. Discarded soap and soiled bed linen is recycled for use at back-of-house areas.

The hotel regularly allows local artisans and artists to exhibit their work in the Arts Lounge, which acts as the focal point of meetings and relaxation. Recent exhibitions have included paintings highlighting the beauty of Khmer women, sculptures created from decommissioned weapons from the Khmer Rouge era, and photographs exploring the role of Ouk Chatrang (Cambodian chess) in Khmer culture.

Duplex suite



Contact and booking information

Hotel de la Paix
Sivatha St, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 63 966 000
E-mail: info@hoteldelapaixangkor.com
Web: www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com

Shinta Mani Institute of Hospitality
Junction of Oum Khun & 14 St, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 63 761 998
E-mail: reservations@shintamani.com
Web: www.shintamani.com

Upcountry Homestay

 **Activity:** Khmer Village Homestay.

 **Location:** Kompong Thom province.

 **Tip:** Request a real homestay in advance to ensure a stay with a local family.



A Khmer traditional house

Experience a slice of rural life when travelling between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap with a traditional homestay in Kompong Thom province.

The experience: Khmer Village Homestay offers an insight into rural life in Cambodia, offering visitors the chance to spend the night in a local community. Bungalow accommodation is available in the village and genuine homestays can be arranged with some notice. Palm thatch huts are available, as well as a traditional Khmer house. All accommodation includes access to clean bathrooms, as well as three hearty meals a day. Project organisers promise no spiders or insects on the menu, but lots of good Khmer country food.

Activities include village tours by ox cart or donkey cart and guided walks in the surrounding area. It is also possible to learn how to fish with the locals, as well as see boat making in progress for the fishing season. For the more adventurous, it is possible to climb a sugar palm tree to help with the daily palm wine harvest, the closest thing to draft beer in the Cambodian countryside.

An Ox cart trip



The village includes a handicraft production centre with weaving, sewing and printing projects underway. There are also traditional Cambodian dance performances by local school children.

Khmer Village Homestay gives visitors a taste of the rural lifestyle in Cambodia. Guests can witness an authentic Cambodian village and learn about typical lives and livelihoods in the countryside. Khmer Village Homestay is situated in Baray District, Kompong Thom province, the heartland of Cambodia, about 120 km from Phnom Penh on the road to Siem Reap.

How it helps: Khmer Village Homestay provides an income to villagers in Baray district. This region of Kompong Thom does not have a wealth of tourist attractions, so the homestay project is a unique way to allow rural Cambodians to participate in the tourism industry.

Khmer Village Homestay contributes directly to the community with all benefits going to the local people. All transport such as ox carts, boats and other transport are sourced locally. Tourism creates new opportunities and more jobs for the local community. Khmer Village Homestay employs six full-time local staff.

Contact and booking information

Esther Ding
118 St 330, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 635 718
E-mail: khmervillagehomestay@yahoo.com
Web: www.khmerhomestay.com

Off the Beaten Path

 **Activity:** Local Adventures Cambodia.

 **Location:** Throughout Cambodia.

 **Tip:** Ride the 'bamboo train' on a trip into the countryside.



Local adventure in countryside

Take a local adventure into the backwaters of Cambodia to see a different side of the country and help spread income from tourism.

The experience: Local Adventures Cambodia is an inbound tour operator specialising in tailor-made travel. The company offers gentle adventures to a Cambodia less travelled. Local Adventures stands out from the crowd thanks to a wide network of travel partners in Cambodia and unique itineraries to off-the-beaten-track destinations such as Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Kompong Cham, Kampot, Prey Veng, Kirirom and beyond. Local Adventures prides itself on its flexibility and will try to handle any request.

Local Adventures has been operating for several years. Most of the customers come from Europe. Travellers can book through the website or when in Cambodia. Local Adventures has an office in the centre of Phnom Penh. The multilingual staff have all travelled throughout the country and can provide reliable information about Cambodia.

The enthusiastic team is happy to inform travellers about the numerous attractions Cambodia has to offer.

How it helps: The name says it all. Local Adventures strives to work closely with local people instead of big international corporations. Where other travel companies focus on short breaks to Angkor Wat, Local Adventures emphasises the tranquillity of rural life and the beauty of less-visited areas.

Tourism has the potential to serve as a sustainable source of income for locals in the poorer regions of Cambodia. A big problem in Cambodia is that tourism is not developed in remote regions in part because locals do not have the opportunities to invest in tourism services. It is not just a lack of money. It is due to a lack of knowledge and experience. Local Adventures has developed exclusive homestays in Kompong Cham and Prey Veng province, which help spread the benefits of tourism.

Local Adventures is also behind COLT (the Cambodian Organization for Learning and Training). This orphanage provides shelter, education and vocational training to improve the lives of Khmer children. Local Adventures already offers volunteer travel. There are plans to coordinate this in a more structured way and assist orphanages in other areas. For more on COLT, visit www.colt-cambodia.org.




Contact and booking information

14, St 258, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 23 990 460
E-mail: info@cambodia.nl
Web: www.cambodia.nl

For the Smile of a Child

 **Activity:** Le Lotus Blanc.

 **Location:** Phnom Penh.

 **Tip:** Make a short visit to the Stung Meanchey municipal dump with its scavenging children. It is a stark sight.



The staff at work

Enjoy lunch at a renowned restaurant that is offering a better future to the children from the municipal dump in Phnom Penh.

The experience: Le Lotus Blanc specialises in fine Asian and European flavours and draws a regular crowd to indulge in its popular set lunches. Established to offer vocational training to children who live around the Stung Meanchey municipal garbage dump, the restaurant has earned a name for itself thanks to subtle flavours and attentive service.

As well as the popular restaurant, there is also a hotel school here and several rooms are available for guests. However, these tend to be popular with visiting supporters of PSE projects, as the location is a little out of the way for most tourists. There is also a beauty and spa school, so visitors can also arrange a massage to help relax after a delicious lunch.

Lunch time



How it helps: Le Lotus Blanc is run by Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (PSE - For the Smile of a Child), a French NGO that has been protecting, feeding and educating children who live and work in the streets around the Stung Meanchey dump since 1996. In order to offer them a better future, PSE provides vocational training in the hotel and restaurant sector.

The main PSE centre is open to visitors on weekdays from 0800 to 1700 and on Saturday mornings. It is possible to witness all the PSE activities on a visit to the centre. PSE supports almost 5,000 children from birth through to young adulthood. PSE provides the youngsters with food, healthcare, education and vocational training.

As well as vocational training for the hotel and hospitality industry, there is also a shop where PSE sells handicrafts made by the parents of the young children at the centre. Many visitors help by giving money or becoming regular donors to PSE. However, PSE is happy to welcome visitors for a meal or a massage, as this helps to improve the training of the students. PSE does not make a profit through the restaurant and spa, but both need customers to ensure students experience training that closely mirrors the reality of the workplace. The better trained the students, the better equipped they are to find a job and help their families.


Eat a meal, take a drink or relax with a massage, a visit to Le Lotus Blanc is helping impoverished Cambodian families towards a better life.


Location and booking information

402 Village Trea, Stung Meanchey, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 23 995 660
E-mail: communication@site-pse.org
Web: www.pse.asso.fr
Open 1200-1400 Monday to Friday only

Designs for Life

 **Activity:** Mekong Blue.

 **Location:** 4 km outside of Stung Treng, along the river.

 **Tip:** Visit the café and gallery at lunchtime to combine dining and shopping in one visit.



Label photo

Striking silk designs cause a stir in northern Cambodia and help vulnerable women work towards a new life.

The experience: Mekong Blue is the silk weaving showroom of the Stung Treng Women's Development Centre (SWDC) and has become famous throughout Cambodia for the high quality of its handwoven silk. Mekong Blue has a range of international clients for its silk. With the volume of overland tourist traffic between Cambodia and Laos increasing, the outlet is set to become a popular stop for visitors in Stung Treng.

The first weaving centre opened in 2003 and is now the flagship Mekong Blue operation with almost 30 women working. Mekong Blue products are 100% silk fibres, use natural dyes and are woven on traditional handlooms. UNESCO has twice honoured Mekong Blue with its Seal of Excellence award for Mekong Blue silk scarves in 2004 and 2005. Mekong Blue has more than 200 patterns and encourages customers to create their own designs to improve the confidence and knowledge of the weavers. As well as visiting the

Label photo



weaving centre, there is also a café and gallery open to the public, offering a mouthwatering range of Khmer and international dishes. Order some food and browse the gallery, which includes a selection of the finest weaving from Mekong Blue.

Mekong Blue is located about 4 km from the centre of Stung Treng. Visit the website to have a look at their online catalogue, which includes scarves, clothing, accessories and bedding.

How it helps: Mekong Blue has created dozens of jobs for vulnerable rural women in Stung Treng province. The jobs have boosted confidence, improved livelihoods and empowered people to better plan their lives and make decisions about their future. Mekong Blue has reinforced the vision that with opportunity, meaningful human development in Cambodia is possible.

The SWDC was originally established as a crisis centre for the terminally ill, mainly those infected with HIV-AIDS. However, the focus has steadily shifted towards preventing infection in healthy young people, particularly vulnerable women. This has led to an expansion in education and health-care programmes combined with training and employment opportunities to provide more choices in life.

Current programmes include literacy and health education, school sponsorship, vocational training in weaving and sewing or carpentry and construction, and child care. All these are dedicated to breaking the cycle of poverty and giving new hope to the women of Stung Treng. Proceeds from Mekong Blue are ploughed back into the SWDC to improve and expand existing programmes.

Location and contact information

Street 1, Sre Po village, Stung Treng.

Tel: (+855) [0] 74 973 977

E-mail: info@mekongblue.com


Web: www.mekongblue.com

Café and gallery open from 0730-1700 Monday to Saturday. Weaving centre open from 0730-1130 and 1400-1700 Monday to Saturday.

A Cambodian Craft Centre

 **Activity:** NCDP Handicrafts.

 **Location:** Phnom Penh.

 **Tip:** NCDP Handicrafts offers a tailor-made home décor service where customers choose their own colours and designs.



Label Photo

Visit a boutique in the capital that provides a showcase for the best of Cambodian handicrafts produced by the disabled community.

The experience. NCDP Handicrafts is a popular Phnom Penh retail outlet located in the National Centre for Disabled Persons. Operating for more than a decade, NCDP Handicrafts produces high quality Cambodian products on sale in the boutique, as well as orders for export.

Cambodian silk is a speciality and NCDP produces a fine range of handmade handbags, purses, wallets and accessories, as well as larger items such as cushion covers and throws. Scarves remain one of the most popular items and the store includes a superb range of designs and colours.

Other popular products include handmade cards, including seasonal Christmas cards, wood carvings, stone carvings and everyday items such as souvenir t-shirts. All NCDP products are produced by members of Cambodia's disabled community.

Label photo



How it helps. NCDP Handicrafts provides income and employment for members of Cambodia's disabled community, helping them to lead a more normal life. NCDP projects aim to raise the living standards of Cambodia's disabled community and the organisation provides support and training to an extensive network throughout the country. NCDP Handicrafts works closely with artisans in the areas of design, manufacturing and quality control. The artisans benefit from a national outlet in which to display their products. This is a shop window for the disabled community in Cambodia, allowing people from different provinces to display their crafts to a national and international audience.

NCDP helps about 150 people with disabilities each year to make a living through the sale of handicrafts. A further 450 people with disabilities are subcontracted as part of the production process and as many as 750 family members benefit. All in all, as many as 1800 people benefit directly from NCDP projects each year.

NCDP Handicrafts is continually looking to improve the quality of its products and plans to expand its product line overseas, supplying to more wholesale businesses in other countries. It is envisioned that in time, this will create hundreds of new jobs for Cambodia's disabled community. Those supported through the work of NCDP include victims of landmines.


Location and contact information

3 Norodom Blvd, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 23 213 734
E-mail: ncdp@online.com.kh
Web: www.ncdpcam.org
Open daily from 0800 to 1800

Birds of the Flooded Forest

 **Activity:** Osmose.

 **Location:** Mostly Prek Toal near Siem Reap.

 **Tip:** For the best bird watching experience, take an overnight trip to the Prek Toal Biosphere which allows late-afternoon and early-morning spotting.



Children of the floating village

Witness some of the rarest birds in Southeast Asia in their pristine natural environment and help secure their future by taking a tour that works in partnership with local communities in floating villages amid semi-submerged forests.

The experience: Osmose specialises in ecotours to the Prek Toal Biosphere, one of the premier birdwatching sites in Southeast Asia. Prek Toal is home to breeding colonies of large water birds now extinct elsewhere in the region and is a pristine flooded forest environment. Some of the more accessible birds include lesser and greater adjutants, spot-billed pelicans and milky storks. These incredible birds have huge wing spans and construct large nests in the trees of the flooded forest.

Osmose offers day trips and overnight tours from Siem Reap to the Prek Toal Biosphere. Osmose has been operating since 1999 and tries to create harmony between the unique environment of the semi-submerged forests, the incredible birdlife, and the local communities that have lived in this area for hundreds of years.

A premier birdwatching site in Southeast Asia



As well as organising birding tours to Prek Toal, Osmose offers canoeing tours of the floating villages which provide unique insights into everyday life on the lake. The Prek Toal Biosphere is about two hours from Siem Reap by a combination of road and boat.

How it helps: Osmose is a non-profit NGO working in conservation, environmental education and sustainable development.

The Osmose ecotourism project offers alternative livelihoods to the local communities through opportunities in guiding, paddling, providing food and accommodation and the sales of water hyacinth handicrafts. Osmose has helped to revitalise water hyacinth weaving to promote handicrafts and this has helped to improve the lives of many village women. All these jobs and services are linked to the conservation of the environment around Prek Toal. Osmose has turned poachers into gamekeepers and employs more than 25 locals to protect the waterbird colonies.

Osmose is responsible for the environmental education of more than 1,200 children in three floating villages in the Prek Toal-Tonle Sap area. Subjects include the importance of the forest in the life cycle of the fish on which the community depends for its livelihood, conservation of the forest flora and fauna, and responsible waste management, differentiating organic matter from inorganic.


Contact and booking information

Esther Ding
118 St 330, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 635 718
E-mail: khmervillagehomestay@yahoo.com
Web: www.khmerhomestay.com

What a Circus!

 **Activity:** Phare Ponleu Selpak.

 **Location:** Battambang.

 **Tip:** Take a guide as a translator to get the gist of the performances and catch some of the humour.



Rehabilitation of the street children

Take part in the revival of the Khmer arts with a visit to a local performing circus troupe that offers an alternative lifestyle in the arts community for young Cambodians.

The experience: Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS: the brightness of art) is famous throughout Cambodia for its exploits in circus and performance. A Cambodian NGO created in 1994, the group originally performed in the refugee camps on the Thai border and is now based in Battambang in Northwest Cambodia. Visitors are welcomed to the centre and a variety of activities are on offer.

There are regular circus performances under the tent in the grounds, which are fun for all the family. Acts include fire juggling, acrobatics and clowns, as well as some dance performances. It is also possible to enjoy traditional Khmer cuisine in the restaurant, as well as browse the permanent art exhibition on display. PPS also offers drawing workshops at the 11th century Angkorian temple of Wat Ek Phnom.

Acrobat Show



These are led by visual art students and are great way to get to know some young Cambodians. For those who want to get even closer to Khmer culture, PPS can arrange dinner and a homestay with a Cambodian family.

How it helps: Phare Ponleu Selpak focuses on rehabilitating street children, orphans, and children living in risky situations and providing them with a sustainable future through the understanding of art.

About 350 children are involved in artistic activities such as visual arts, music, circus, drama and dance, including teenagers and young adults. Students can choose artistic activities for leisure or vocational training to become a professional. PPS focuses on turning art into a sustainable activity by assisting students with the sale of their artistic creations, promoting their work through exhibitions and performances, and giving them the opportunity to redefine modern Cambodian art.

The artistic vocational training creates performance arts such as dance, circus and drama, plus music concerts and visual arts such as cartoons and exhibitions. The profit is split 40/40/20: 40% goes to the artists, 40% goes to the school the artist attends, and 20% goes to social services and the administration of PPS. If it was not for PPS they would have no way to raise their voices, even when it comes to their basic needs. Thus children in the centre acquire life skills, self-esteem and confidence, as they participate in the artistic and cultural development of their country.

Location and contact information

Phare Ponleu Selpak, Battambang, Cambodia.


Tel: (+855) [0] 53 952 424


E-mail: inquiries@phareps.org

Web: www.phareps.org

Wildlife in Safe Hands

 **Activity:** Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre.

 **Location:** 40 km south of Phnom Penh.

 **Tip:** Try to visit on a weekday, as it's crowded at the weekend.



Elephant

Encounter the diversity of Cambodian wildlife at one of the best rescue centres in the region, providing a sanctuary for countless threatened species.

The experience: Phnom Tamao is Cambodia's leading zoological collection and one of the finest wildlife rescue centres in Southeast Asia. Set in 2,300 hectares of protected forest just 40 km south of Phnom Penh, Phnom Tamao provides a perfect day excursion from the city and enables visitors to view some of Cambodia's most spectacular wildlife in a natural forest setting. As many as 1,000 animals from more 80 species of Cambodian wildlife can be found at the centre. Elephants, tigers, leopards, bears and other large mammals, all rescued from the illegal wildlife trade or donated by owners who could no longer care for them, are now housed in large, naturalised enclosures within the Phnom Tamao Protected Forest. Phnom Tamao was established by the Forestry Administration of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries in 1995.

Asian black bear



It is supported by a number of international conservation organizations such as Wildlife Alliance, Free the Bears Fund and Care for the Wild. The centre is home to the world's largest captive collections of pleated gibbons and Malayan sun bears, as well as other rarities such as Siamese crocodiles and greater adjutant storks. Wherever possible animals are released back into the wild once they have recovered. The centre operates breeding programmes for a number of globally threatened species.

Cambodia's wildlife is usually very difficult to spot, as larger mammals inhabit remote and inhospitable areas of the country. Phnom Tamao is the perfect place to discover more about the incredible variety of animals in Cambodia.

How it helps: As the only official government-owned facility for the placement of rescued wildlife within Cambodia, Phnom Tamao plays a pivotal role in the fight against the illegal wildlife trade. Each year, hundreds of animals are rehabilitated here before being re-released into protected areas throughout the country whilst other species are bred for future reintroduction and to create a 'safety net' population for their wild counterparts.

With around 400,000 visitors per year, the centre also performs a vital role in helping to educate Cambodians about the conservation threats facing many of the country's wild animals. The centre helps shape attitudes towards a more sustainable approach regarding natural resources. Phnom Tamao is a popular place for school trips from Phnom Penh, which ensures Cambodia's future generations are educated as to the importance of wildlife protection.

Location and contact information

Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre, Bati District, Takeo Province, Cambodia.

Tel: Not available


E-mail: info@cambodianwildliferescue.org

Web: www.cambodianwildliferescue.org

Creating Hotel Skills

 **Activity:** Sala Bai Hotel School.

 **Location:** Siem Reap.

 **Tip:** The rooms are great value and staying here gives the staff valuable hospitality experience.



Sooner a great chef?

Help the 'students of rice' on their path to a new career in the hospitality industry by enjoying a meal or staying overnight at Sala Bai.

The experience: Sala Bai ('students of rice') is a hospitality school in Siem Reap that offers hotel and catering training to young disadvantaged Cambodians. Both the restaurant and the hotel are open to real customers to allow the students to get hands-on experience of the hospitality industry and prepare them for work in a real environment.

The Sala Bai restaurant is open from November to July and offers both breakfast and lunch on weekdays. The menu is a blend of Cambodian and International cuisine and includes set meals as well as a la carte dishes. A full range of drinks is also available, including fresh juices and shakes and a well-stocked bar. If you like the food, then pick up the cook book, which is available at the restaurant or online. The hotel offers three standard rooms and one suite, all of which are equipped with air-conditioning and hot water in the bathroom.

A nice presentation



Staying here offers valuable experience for both the front desk team and the housekeeping staff.

How it helps: Established by the French NGO Agir Pour Le Cambodge in October 2002, Sala Bai offers professional training in the hospitality industry. Tourism is the lifeblood of Siem Reap thanks to the incredible temples of Angkor. Sala Bai offers students a helping hand into the industry.

There is a practical hotel and restaurant within the school which allows staff to implement what they learn in theory classes. Sala Bai gives priority to girls, who are the most excluded from the traditional school and employment system. Female students currently make up about 70% of the intake. Students are between 17 and 23 years old.


The main objective is to provide students with high quality training in four areas: restaurant and bar service, kitchen, housekeeping, and front office. Each year, the school enrolls 100 students, selected through an examination which includes tests, interviews and motivational exercises. Four months of internship in high-class hotels gives the students firsthand professional experience which is a real asset in the search for a job. Students are also provided with accommodation, three meals a day and a bicycle.

After graduating to new employment, former students can support themselves and their family and assist in the development of their country. Sala Bai helps students with preparing a CV and completing application forms. More than 95% Sala Bai students find work within three months of graduation, making the programme one of the most successful in Cambodia.


Location and booking information

155 Phoum Tapoul, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 63 963 329
E-mail: salabai.admin@online.com.kh
Web: www.salabai.com

See Birds of the Bayon

 **Activity:** Birdwatching with the Sam Veasna Centre.

 **Location:** Northwest Cambodia.

 **Tip:** Go in the dry season. It's the best time for birdwatching and roads are passable.



The Sam Veasna Centre

Witness some of Cambodia's rarest birdlife at close quarters on a pioneering ecotour that is working with the community to protect bird and wildlife species.

The experience: The Sam Veasna Centre (SVC) promotes wildlife conservation and is a focal point for conservation initiatives in northwest Cambodia. The centre increases public awareness of Cambodia's rich wildlife heritage, and promotes activities that promote wildlife conservation. The centre offers world-class birding trips to the remote regions of northern Cambodia.

Large groups of sarus crane are found in Ang Trapeng Thmor in Banteay Meanchey during the dry season. This tall bird has a vivid crimson head and is depicted on bas-reliefs at the Bayon. The site also provides a habitat for about 200 other birds, including 18 endangered species.

The giant ibis has attained near-mythical status for birdwatchers thanks to its rarity. It is found in the Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary near Tmatboey village. This location is also famous as the only nesting site in Asia for the white-shouldered ibis.

Wildlife heritage



The Florican Grasslands of the Tonle Sap floodplain provide a habitat for the rare Bengal florican, as well as the Manchurian reed warbler. All sites are areas protected by the Wildlife Conservation Society. The SVC, a non-profit organization, manages the ecotourism programme for these unique sites.

SVC now works with tour companies and individuals to put together custom trips of varying sizes, providing a trained English-speaking birding guide who is familiar with the destinations and the special birds at each site.

How it helps: The Sam Veasna Centre acts as an information, resource, and visitor centre catering both to Cambodians and visiting tourists. In the remote areas, ecotourism provides an alternative source of income to villagers, encouraging them to value natural resources such as wildlife and habitats.

The protection of the birding sites is ensured through the local villagers' direct participation in the ecotourism project. They provide transportation, lodging and retail services, as well as the all-important guiding and ranger services.

At all the birding sites, the communities benefit from donations to the Conservation Contribution Fund, which was set up to encourage the protection of the environment and endangered species in the surrounding area. In Tmatboey, when particular endangered species are seen by the birders, a set amount is donated to this fund, which is administered by the village committee and used to fund community development projects.

Location and booking information

552 Group 12, Wat Bo, Siem Reap, Cambodia.




Tel: (+855) [0] 63 761 597

E-mail: bookings@samveasna.org

Web: www.samveasna.org



Healing Hands of the Blind

-  **Activity:** Seeing Hands Massage.
-  **Location:** Phnom Penh and major towns.
-  **Tip:** Book ahead as Seeing Hands in Phnom Penh is very popular.

Relax with a massage expertly given by blind Cambodian masseurs to help members of the blind community towards an independent life.

The experience: Seeing Hands Massage is the perfect way to wind down after sightseeing on a hot humid day. Blind masseurs have been trained in the art of massage and can relax and refresh your body with an hour of soothing treatment. Shiatsu massage is available which focuses on pressure points or choose anma massage which helps to relax the body and the mind. At just US\$5.50 per hour, this is one of the best value massages in Cambodia and helps to ensure blind people can make an independent living. There is also the option of a traditional foot massage, which costs US\$6. Many of the masseurs have earned diplomas and certificates in massage from overseas institutes in Japan and Singapore.

Seeing Hands Massage has been a great success and there are currently several branches in Phnom Penh, as well as branches in popular tourist cities around the country. You can find Seeing Hands in Siem Reap, Battambang and Sihanoukville. The Florican Grasslands of the Tonle Sap floodplain provide a habitat for the rare Bengal florican, as

well as the Manchurian reed warbler. All sites are areas protected by the Wildlife Conservation Society. The SVC, a non-profit organization, manages the ecotourism programme for these unique sites.

SVC now works with tour companies and individuals to put together custom trips of varying sizes, providing a trained English-speaking birding guide who is familiar with the destinations and the special birds at each site.

How it helps: Seeing Hands Massage creates employment for members of Cambodia's blind community. Without adequate social services in many parts of Cambodia, life for blind people is one long struggle. Seeing Hands Massage offers blind masseurs an independent sustainable income which helps them to lead a relatively normal life. The masseurs can earn a very good salary by Cambodian standards, usually a better monthly wage than for many non-disabled Cambodians.

The Seeing Hands Massage centres are privately run associations, run by successful blind entrepreneurs. The main Phnom Penh centre currently employs 13 blind masseurs and there are more than 25 blind masseurs working with the various projects around the country. There are also a number of sighted support staff to help out with day-to-day administration.

Location and booking information

Phnom Penh

12, St 13, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 680 934

Siem Reap

Address: Sivatha St, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) 12 786 894

Sihanoukville

95, Mondol 3, Sihanoukville, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 295 433

Battambang

20 Usaphea Village, Battambang, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 484 712

Making Scents of It All

 Activity: Senteurs D'Angkor.

 Location: Siem Reap.

 Tip: Aromatic Cambodian pepper is among the world's finest. It makes a simple and useful gift.



An home-made soap

Experience the authentic scents and tastes of Cambodia through a range of traditional handmade products that help create jobs and incomes for impoverished rural communities.

The experience: Senteurs d'Angkor produces an enticing range of natural Cambodian products which draw on the country's abundant nature for their inspiration. Delicatessen delights include spices, traditional teas, highland coffees and local rice liquors blended with ginger, cinnamon or coffee. Choose a range of scents such as natural soaps infused with lemongrass, jasmine or banana. Then there are medicinal balms and natural massage oils such as eucalyptus as well as perfumed candles and Cambodian incense.

Senteurs' main boutique is near the Old Market in Siem Reap and includes a full range of their handmade beauty and culinary products. The shop also includes many Khmer handicrafts such as handwoven silk, sandstone and marble sculpture, as well as metalwork finished in silver, brass and copper. All Senteurs d'Angkor products are easily spotted by their original packaging, handmade from the leaves of the sugar palm.

Spices



Customers are welcome to visit the workshop near Wat Damnak to discover the secrets of the scents and flavours. For those who want to take the flavours or fragrance of the Khmer kingdom home, there is another boutique at the workshop.

Senteurs d'Angkor products are also available in Kokoon boutique in Siem Reap, and at both the domestic and international terminals at Phnom Penh and Siem Reap international airports.

How it helps: Created in 1999, Senteurs d'Angkor now employs 50 staff at the workshop. The majority of them are drawn from rural areas and have a low level of education. Senteurs d'Angkor tries to ensure the best possible working environment and pays a good salary to all staff. The company operates a profit share scheme to ensure all staff have a stake in the business.

Senteurs d'Angkor purchases most of its raw materials in Cambodia, especially from rural communities. This includes the finest ingredients from all over the country such as cashew nuts, honey, jasmine, coconut oil and pepper. The sugar palm packaging requires a constant harvest of leaves from the countryside. It is estimated that Senteurs' sugar palm supply chain is responsible for about another 100 jobs.


Location and contact information


Old Market, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 954 815
E-mail: gm@senteursdangkor.com
Web: www.senteursdangkor.com

The shop is open 0800 to 1930 daily.
The workshop is open 0700 to 1700 Monday to Saturday.

A Café That Cares

 **Activity:** The Singing Tree cafe.

 **Location:** Siem Reap.

 **Tip:** This is one of the most child-friendly places in Siem Reap, thanks to a large, enclosed garden.



A friendly atmosphere

Retreat to a lush garden café serving tasty vegetarian creations that acts as a focus for environmental and community awareness in Siem Reap.

The experience: The Singing Tree Café is a delightful garden café situated just a short stroll from the centre of Siem Reap. The café management aims to promote responsible tourism, social ecology and foster community spirit. The menu is mostly vegetarian (with some fish and a little seafood) and offers a selection of Khmer home-cooking, as well as salads, home baked bread and grilled sandwiches. The drinks selection includes smoothies, juices and shakes, as well as creative teas and coffees. Free wi-fi access is available for all customers and there is an additional free computer for those without a laptop.

Opened in 2005, the café houses a Fair Trade shop and promotes information on environmental awareness and social issues in and around Siem Reap. The upstairs community space has a library of quality DVDs, including movies on Khmer history, religion and an extensive collection of art, children's and alternative movies. Lectures and presentations on environmental issues comple

A delightful garden café



ment the regular schedule of yoga and meditation practice.

How it helps: The Singing Tree supports the environment in several ways. The café hosts display boards with environmental information concerning the forest and wildlife situation in Cambodia. There are regular presentations by organizations and individuals who work in these areas. Presentations to date include the subjects of wildlife preservation, water filters and solar power. The café sells fresh and healthy, organic vegetarian and vegan food.

The Singing Tree also supports disadvantaged people in a number of ways. The café is an active fund-raiser for two projects, The Green Gecko Project for street children and Osmose Water Hyacinth Handicraft Products for the women of Prek Toal. This is done by facilitating community workshops and classes where the fees are donated to the projects. The café's information boards help to raise funds for the Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity, Osmose, The Green Gecko Project and the Trailblazer Foundation.

The small shop at the café displays and promotes Fair Trade products from four different sources: Rehab Craft Cambodia, Silk Lab Handmade Accessories, the Osmose Water Hyacinth Project, and the Buddhist Association shop in Thailand.

To get there, it's a three minutes' walk from the Old Market and Pub Street (Psar Chas). Cross the river at the bridge. Turn left and walk along the river. Turn right into the second lane. Enter the green


Location and contact information

PO Box 93247, Siem Reap, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 965 500
E-mail: info@singingtreecafe.com
Web: www.singingtreecafe.com

Cool Café With Heart

 Activity: Starfish Bakery.

 Location: Sihanoukville, southern Cambodia.

 Tip: If you're not hungry, have a massage or shop for handicrafts.



Kids

A classy café, sassy spa and gift shop that create employment for disabled people and assist vulnerable locals in the wider community.

The experience: The Starfish Bakery and Café is a shady retreat from the bustle of downtown Sihanoukville and a great place to relax during the heat of the day. The café menu includes home-made pastries, freshly baked bread, delicious chocolate brownies, healthy salads, inventive sandwiches and fresh fruit shakes. All customers can enjoy free wireless Internet access and the peaceful garden is the perfect backdrop to keep in touch with family and friends.

As well as the popular café, there is also a handicrafts shop upstairs that sells an excellent range of local products made by disabled people. The Sala Santepheap Massage Centre is also found here and is an indulgent way to relax after a busy day of fun in the sun. Indian head massage, Thai massage, foot massage and aromatherapy

Enjoy the delicious cinnamon roll



are all available and administered by experienced blind masseurs. The café is located down a side street behind Samudera Market in the centre of Sihanoukville.

How it helps: A Buddhist monk was on the beach with his apprentice the day after a fierce storm. Thousands of starfish had been washed up and stranded on the shore. Stooping down, the monk carefully lifted a single creature and returned it to the sea. His young apprentice wondered aloud why his master bothered to do this when it made little difference to the mass of helpless creatures. As they walked along, the monk picked up another single starfish and replied, "It makes a difference to this one."

This is the guiding principle behind the Starfish Project, a charitable grassroots organization founded in 2000 as a community-based humanitarian initiative. Starfish meets its objective by providing its clients and their families with the means to gain self-sufficiency and independence.

Starfish are involved in a diversity of projects such as housing, community and water projects, medical and livelihood assistance, business start-ups, support to women living in prisons and other self-sustainable projects.

The Starfish bakery and café was set up in 2001 and exclusively hires disabled people that would struggle finding meaningful jobs as a result of their disabilities. Income generated from all these businesses fund the staff salaries, rent utilities and covers the administrative costs of the Starfish project so that donations are solely used to help disadvantaged people.


Location and contact information


Off 7 Makara St, Behind Samudera Market,
Sihanoukville, Cambodia.
Tel: (+855) [0] 12 952 011
E-mail: info@starfishcambodia.org
Web: www.starfishcambodia.org
Open 0700 to 1700 daily



Coffee for Change

 **Activity:** The Global Child.

 **Location:** Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

 **Tip:** Joe-to-Go is a great place to get your caffeine kick before sunrise at Angkor Wat.



Street children

Visit two small coffee houses with big ambitions to offer a better future to Cambodian street children through specialised education.

The experience: The Global Child is a non-profit organisation founded to build and operate specialty schools and safe-houses for gifted street-children in developing, often war-torn, countries around the world. It operates two small cafes in Cambodia, Café 151 in Phnom Penh and Joe-To-Go in Siem Reap, to help raise funds for the school.

Café 151 has a prime location on the Phnom Penh riverfront and sells a wide range of drinks and snacks, making it the ideal spot to watch the world go by. The Global Child school is located above the café and visitors are encouraged to meet the staff and children and see the teaching in action.

Joe-to-Go is a new coffee shop near the Old Market in Siem Reap, providing a selection of fine coffees from around the world. Local coffees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are well-represented, as well as exotic blends from further afield. Joe-to-Go, in Siem Reap, opens at the crack of dawn for those planning a sunrise visit to one of the temples. Drop by and pick up a double espresso to jolt you awake.

How it helps: The cafes raise money to fund the Global Child schools. At the Global Child schools, selected children – hungry for education, food, healthcare and a wholesome future – are nurtured to adopt a responsible role within their communities. In 2008, tourists will be able to visit a working organic farm and new school residence powered by wind, solar and alternative fuels. This will serve as a dynamic educational forum for new green technologies, and an outlet for power and water systems to help Cambodia's impoverished farmers. This service is likely to be the only outpost of its type in the region and could become a blueprint for similar projects worldwide.

The Global Child is committed to helping the poor from the first day of operations. Students are selected from impoverished communities in Phnom Penh and are given an education. Global Child has the sole purpose of serving Cambodia's poor in a humanitarian capacity.

Location and contact information

Café 151

151 Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Tel: (+855) [0] 12 372 438

E-mail: alan@theglobalchild.org

Web: www.theglobalchild.org

Open 0800-1900 daily

Joe-To-Go

Old Market, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Tel: (+855) [0] 92 532 640


Open 0500-1500 daily



Crater Time in the Wild East

 Activity: Yaklom Hill Lodge.

 Location: Ratanakiri province.

 Tip: Trek up to the Sunset Bar for a stunning view over the forests of Ratanakiri.



Crater lake

Experience an award-winning ecotreat in the mountainous province of Ratanakiri, Cambodia's 'Wild East'.

The experience: Yaklom Hill Lodge is the leading ecolodge in Cambodia and has been recognised by several tourism organisations such as Green Globe Awards and Responsible Tourism. This peaceful lodge is set in a lush tract of jungle near the beautiful volcanic crater lake of Yeak Loam. This rich habitat includes more than 60 species of birds and several types of small mammal.

Accommodation is in attractive wooden cottages and includes singles, doubles, triples and a family cottage. There is also a traditional hilltribe house which can sleep up to eight people. All have a private bathroom and electricity by night to power a fan and some lights. The lodge is currently looking at ways to improve solar power and eliminate the need for a generator. The lodge also includes an evocative restaurant and bar.

Local villagers



There are several viewing platforms dotted about the site, offering lush jungle views for sunrise or sunset. There are also nature trails, affording the possibility of bird and wildlife sightings. The lodge also has an extensive trekking programme around Ratanakiri and can organise day walks, overnight treks to tribal villages and longer treks into Virachey National Park. Yaklom Hill Lodge is the ideal place to get away from it all and experience another side of Cambodia, among minority peoples in their mountain home.

How it helps: Yaklom Hill Lodge promotes ecotourism, culturally sensitive tourism and community tourism. The lodge tries to conserve local environment and ecology by protecting vegetation in the lodge area and the habitats of wild animals. It promotes sustainable cultural tourism with the participation of local villagers and it contributes to local communities in support of community development. The lodge pays serious attention to conserving the natural environment and resources, and minimizing its impact on nature. This includes saving water, minimizing the use of conventional energy and promoting the use of renewable energy such as solar power.

The lodge also promotes inter-cultural exchange between visitors and indigenous villagers through its trekking and village homestay programmes. The lodge supports communities with overnight fees for the host families or direct contribution to the host villages through their community development activities. All staff at Yaklom Hill Lodge are locally recruited. The multi-ethnic staff includes the Tompuon, Kreung, Khmer and Lao ethnic groups.

Location and booking information

Office: Yaklom Hill Lodge, National Road 78, Ratanakiri, Cambodia.

Tel: (+855) [0] 12 799 211

E-mail: Yaklom@camintel.com


Web: www.yaklom.com

For international bookings online, visit the following websites: www.ecoclub.com and www.responsibletravel.com

Woven with Respect

 **Activity:** Weaves of Cambodia.

 **Location:** Preah Vihear, northern Cambodia.

 **Tip:** Visit the workshop on your overland trip to the jungle temples of Preah Vihear.



Colorful textiles

From the red earth of Preah Vihear, a community of determined landmine survivors is creating a sustainable income through traditional weaving.

The experience: Weaves of Cambodia is a village-based silk weaving studio located in the remote province of Preah Vihear in the far north of Cambodia. It was established in 1997 to offer employment opportunities for landmine survivors. The studio is directed by American textile designer Carol Cassidy, who also runs a renowned silk weaving outlet in Vientiane.

Visitors are welcome to explore the studio in Tbeng Meanchey in Preah Vihear province. Tours are available and staff are happy to explain every step of the production process. This part of Cambodia sees fewer tourists than most, so the team are always happy to meet new visitors and demonstrate their skills. There is a small showroom at the studio where visitors can purchase unique handmade silk accessories such as scarves and shawls.

A young girl demonstrate her weaving skills



Continuous training in colour theory, textile design, marketing and management has contributed to a reputation of excellence throughout Cambodia. Weaves of Cambodia offers handwoven silk with a commitment to quality, craftsmanship and creativity. The world-class textiles are sold in design shops throughout Asia, Europe and the United States.

How it helps: Working closely with Village Focus International, Weaves of Cambodia is a community-based enterprise employing landmine survivors and disabled people. Preah Vihear has one of the highest levels of landmine victims in the country and this project tries to focus on vulnerable women and their families.

Weaves of Cambodia strives to uphold Fair Trade values. It provides a rare employment opportunity for physically challenged artisans to earn a significant income that supports the entire family. The remote Studio enables the weavers of Tbeng Meanchey to stay in their rural homes, be gainfully employed, have professional integrity and contribute to the economy.

Weaves of Cambodia is Khmer managed and employs more than 40 rural artisans. Weaves is making strides toward self-sufficiency and hopes to remain a viable model for weaving success in Cambodia. Village Focus assists with management, marketing, development and accounting. Weaves' silk is helping Cambodia weave a brighter future.

Location and contact information

Workshop: Kokbeng Village, Tbeng Meanchey, Preah Vihear, Cambodia.

Office: 12C St 308, Phnom Penh

Tel: (+855) [0] 12 737 116

E-mail: ccassidy@weavescambodia.com

Web: www.weavescambodia.com



Laos - Country Profile

Sunset on the Mekong river ; previous page : Si Phan Don islands

Climate

Laos generally enjoys a mild tropical climate, but it can get quite chilly in the cool season. Temperatures range from 10 – 40 degrees Celsius in the Mekong Valley but during the cool season may dip to below zero in the mountains and on the Xieng Khouang and Bolaven Plateaux, especially during the early morning. There are three distinct seasons - cool (November-February), hot (March-May) and rainy (June-October). Most people find the best time to visit from October-February although the rainy season offers lush green landscapes, the colourful Lao New Year's festival in April and fewer tourists.

Location & Geography

Landlocked and dominated by forested mountains and high plateaux Laos stretches for 1,700 km from its northern borders with Myanmar and China to Cambodia in the south occupying a land area of 236,800 square km and lying at the centre of the Indochinese peninsula. A mountainous, densely forested spine known as the Annamite Range runs the eastern length of the country forming the border between Laos and Vietnam.

The mountain chain reaches its highest point at 2,800m in the north (Phou Bia) and at its southern extremity in Attapeu and Champasak provinces opens out into the vast Bolaven Plateau, a 10,000 square km area famed for its cool climate, waterfalls and coffee production. To the west mighty Mekong forms the border with Thailand, its valley running the entire western length of the country and providing Laos with much of its fish and sedentary rice production.

History

The first Lao kingdom, Lane Xang was founded in the 14th century by King Fa Ngum after he conquered and unified the lands north of and including Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang and the Korat Plateau, stretching into what is today Thailand. Luang Prabang remained the capital of Lane Xang until King Sethathirat moved the Kingdom's administrative seat to Vientiane in the mid-16th century. Even after the capital moved to Vientiane, Luang Prabang remained the country's spiritual and religious centre. First contact with western emissaries occurred in the mid 17th century during the reign of King Surigna Vongsa. After the death of Surigna Vongsa in 1694 Lane Xang broke up into three separate Kingdoms - Vientiane, Champasak and Luang Prabang.

Village in the north of Laos



Laos together with Vietnam and Cambodia formed French Indochina during the 19th - early 20th century colonial period. Gaining independence from France in 1953, the Pathet Lao socialist revolutionary movement went on to found the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975.

People & Culture

Population and Ethnic Diversity.

With a population of nearly six million people and a density of only 20 people per square km, Laos is the least populated country in Southeast Asia. In comparison Vietnam has a population density of 230 people km² and Thailand 120 people km². Roughly 85% of the population lives in rural areas and is mostly made up of the dominant, lowland Lao ethnic group with the remainder of the population comprising 47 officially recognised ethnic minority groups living mostly in the higher and more remote areas of the country. Collectively the peoples of Laos speak dozens of different languages making the country a major centre for ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Asia.

If you are unable to make it out to the villages there are handcraft shops in almost every provincial capital selling distinct local products. For very high-quality pieces there are many excellent handcraft galleries in the main tourist centers of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and smaller shops in most provinces.

Hmong New Year



Akha girl in traditional dress

Language

The national language is Lao as it is spoken in Vientiane, but English is commonly used in major tourist centres. Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai are widely understood and French, German, Russian and a number of other European languages are also spoken by many educated Laotians as many students received university training in Europe between the 1970's and 1990's.



Nearly all of the lowland Lao people - about 60% of the population - practice Theravada Buddhism while, higher in the mountains, the ethnic minorities tend to be animists whose lives are governed by the presence of *phi* or spirits. Belief in *phi* is blended with the practice of Buddhism and can be seen through out the country in the many ceremonies and rituals that characterise Lao culture and in the small spirit houses seen in peoples homes, restaurants, wats and rice fields which are used to make offerings to the elemental spirits. Most Laotians believe they are being protected by *khwan* - the 32 spirits of the body.

When someone becomes ill it is believed that one or more of the *khwan* have left the body and need to be recalled with a ceremony known as the *baci* to bestow health, prosperity and well being on the afflicted person. The cotton strings that are tied around the wrists of the *baci* participants are used to keep the *khwan* in place. As a traveller to Laos you may well be invited to join a *baci* as it is often performed to welcome and send off guests before and after long trips. It is also the central ritual in Lao weddings and in the naming ceremony for newborn children. Together with the school, the Buddhist wat provides the focal point for village life in lowland Laos. The wat provides a symbol

of village identity as well as a location for ceremonies and festivals. Prior to the establishment of secular schools, village boys received basic education from monks at the wat and traditionally were expected to spend a period as a monk or novice prior to marriage or in old age. No doubt when in Laos you will see the memorable sight of orange robed monks lining up to receive alms in a village or town during their early morning rounds. As monks are trying to detach themselves from the earthly world they are not permitted possessions and so rely on the generosity of the people for food and clothing. Importantly these gifts provide an opportunity for the giver to earn merit for a 'better' next life. Attending prayers at the wat on the quarter, full and new moon of each lunar cycle is an important way in which Lao Buddhists earn merit.

Economy

The largest contributor to the economy is agriculture which provides a living for 80% of the population. The main crop is sticky rice followed by corn, tobacco, cotton and coffee. Raising livestock and the harvest of non-timber forest products such as resins, herbal medicine and forest foods for commercial and home use also make important contributions to the Lao economy and rural people's livelihoods. The primary national industries include mining, tourism, hydropower, garment manufacture, agro-forestry and production of some common consumer goods.

Traditional market



Festivals and Events

In Laos, there is a traditional festival or major holiday almost every month. Lao people are fun and easy-going, and will commonly invite you to participate in many of the colourful festivals held throughout the year. Please feel free to join the fun!

January

Boun Khoun Khao – or the Harvest Festival is celebrated in the countryside after the rice has been harvested. This ceremony is held to give thanks to the spirit of the land and to ensure the next harvest will be plentiful.

February

Kud Chin & Kud Viet – Chinese and Vietnamese New Year are celebrated with parties, fireworks and merit making at Chinese and Vietnamese temples around the country.

Boun Maka Bousa – This festival is held on the full moon to commemorate the speech given by the Lord Buddha to 1,250 enlightened monks that gathered spontaneously, without prior notice. In the evening, the faithful visit local temples and circumambulate the wat three times with candles in a ceremony known as vien tian.

Pi Mai, Pou-gneu sing toe



Pi Mai in Luang Prabang

Boun Khao Chi – special offering of sticky rice is coated with eggs then roasted and offered to monks. This ceremony is associated with Maka Bousa.

March

Lao Women's Day – This is a public holiday to commemorate women's contribution to Lao society. There are many parties at homes and offices.

Boun Pha Vet – temple-based Buddhist festival lasting for three days and three nights that is centred on the telling of the jatka, or story of Prince Vestsantara (the Buddha's second to last life).

April

Boun Pi Mai – or Lao New Year is celebrated for three days in mid-April. The Pi Mai festival is based on the importance of water in people's daily lives: you will get wet during this fun-filled festival.

During Pi Mai, people splash water on one another to cleanse them of misfortune and bring luck in the coming year. In the country's many wats, Buddha images are cleansed with sacred water, and many Lao people make special offerings at the temples during this time of year.

Luang Prabang has the most elaborate Pi Mai festival, but other provinces and towns also celebrate Pi Mai with parades, beauty contests and performances.

May

Boun Visakha Bousa – this festival celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Lord Buddha. It is held on the 15th day of the sixth lunar month. Beautiful candlelit processions take place in the evening.

Boun Bang Fai – the rocket festival. This is a rain making and fertility festival held just before the rainy season where huge hand made rockets are fired into the air to tempt the gods to make rain for the upcoming rice-growing season. This is a wild and happy ceremony that has music, dance, provocative performances and street processions.

July

Boun Khao Pansa – this festival, held on the full moon, marks the beginning of Buddhist lent, a three month period where monks are required to stay within their wat to meditate and focus on darma studies. Lao men are traditionally ordained as monks during this time.

September

Boun Khao Salak – offerings including daily necessities such as books, pens, sugar and coffee are made to specific monks based on a lottery system. Laypeople also give beautiful wax flower candles to the monks to gain merit.

October/November

Boun Ork Pansa – held on the full moon which marks the end of the rainy season, monks who were ordained for the three month lent period, leave the temple and rejoin their families.

During the evening of Van Ork Pansa a beautiful ceremony is held throughout the country in which people launch small, candle-lit banana-leaf boats (*heua fai*) on the rivers replete with offerings of incense and small amounts of money to bring luck and prosperity.

Boun Souang Heua – the festive traditional boat racing festival takes place around the country following Ork Pansa. In Luang Prabang, the boat races are celebrated one month earlier.

Boun That Louang – the biggest party of them all, Boun That Louang attracts what often appears to be the country's entire population to the sacred That Louang temple in Vientiane for a week around the full moon in November.

Hundreds of monks receive floral offerings from merit-makers on the first day of the festival, followed by parades, fireworks and music.

December

Lao National Day – December 2 is Lao National Day, which celebrates the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. There are parades and fairs in all major cities and towns.

Boun Bang Fai in May



Mammals, reptiles and amphibians

Laos is home to over one hundred species of large mammals. Many of these are familiar Asian species such as Tiger, Clouded Leopard, Asian Elephant and Gaur (a species of wild cattle). Lao also holds an impressive diversity of primates including five species of gibbon, five species of macaque and four species of leaf monkey including the stunningly beautiful Douc langur which is found only in Indochina. In recent years Laos has received international attention from the discovery of new species of animals to science, including the Saola, a strange and beautiful forest dwelling antelope like creature, a deer species known as the Giant Muntjac, a small striped mountain rabbit and a completely new family of rodent known locally as the *kha-nyou* that is closely related to porcupines.

In addition to mammals, Lao supports over 165 species of amphibians and reptiles including such impressive species as the Rock and Burmese Pythons, King Cobra and the large and noisy Tokay gecko, a formidable resident of many Lao houses.



Asian Elephant

*Birds*

With over 700 species recorded to date and new species being frequently added to the country list, Laos is becoming known as a renowned bird watching location. As the country has embraced ecotourism, the opportunities are expanding rapidly for visitors to see a variety of beautiful and rare species. The Northern Highlands of the country hold numerous species associated with northern Thailand and the northeastern Himalayas. A huge diversity of babblers as well as Blyth's Kingfisher, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Beautiful Nuthatch, Short-tailed Parrotbill and Yellow-vented Warbler can be found in the forests of the north.

The Mekong Plain supports areas of dry deciduous forest inhabited by Rufous-winged Buzzards, Black-headed Woodpeckers and Small Minivets. The Mekong itself provides an important flyway for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl as well as localized sandbank species such as Small Pratincole, River Lapwing, Great Thick-knee and River Tern.

The southern portion of the Mekong Plain along the Cambodian border is home to the incredibly rare White-shouldered and Giant Ibis as well as small populations of White-rumped and Red-headed Vultures, Lesser Adjutants, Sarus Cranes and White-winged Ducks. The most exciting discovery in the area in recent years has been the description of a new species to science, the Mekong Wagtail. This species was found, within the past decade, to live on sandbanks in the Mekong and a few of its tributaries in southern Laos and Cambodia.

Perhaps the most exciting area for birding in the country is along the Annamite Range that marks the border with Vietnam. In recent years many species once thought to be found only in Vietnam have been discovered in Laos. Species such as the Short-tailed Scimitar Babbler, Yellow-billed Nuthatch and the recently described Black-crowned Barwing are all readily found. Slightly more widespread species include White-winged and Indochinese Green Magpies as well as the shy and difficult to see Crested Argus and Blue-Naped Pitta.

National Protected Areas

The Lao system of 20 National Protected Areas (NPAs) covers nearly 14% of the country and is recognized as one of the best designed protected areas systems in the region. With large tracts of tropical monsoon forest, diverse wildlife populations and spectacular karst limestone formations riddled with caves, Lao protected areas are a major attraction for travellers to Southeast Asia. Although most Lao protected areas are remote and difficult to reach there are many existing opportunities for ecotourism such as trekking, rafting, bird watching and camping that allow you to experience first-hand the country's magnificent natural and cultural diversity. From Vientiane the most accessible protected area offering a variety of ecotourism activities is Phou Khao Khouay NPA where you can trek,

Bird of Prey



Nam Ha NPA

visit spectacular waterfalls and spend the night in an elephant observation tower on the edge of the park. In the provinces visit Nam Ha NPA in Luang Namtha for trekking, watch birds at the Kiatgong wetland in Champasak's Xe Pian NPA or trek Dong Phou Vieng NPA in Savannakhet for a chance to see the beautiful Douc langur.

If you are interested in caves, don't miss the Phou Hin Poun NPA in central Khammouane Province. More activities are being developed in a number of other NPAs so be sure to check with the tourism information centres for news on new ecotourism programmes around the country and use this guidebook for information on specific tours you can make to the country's national parks.

Government Tourism Policy

Eager to position Laos as a top-notch ecotourism destination in South East Asia the Lao National Tourism Administration, related government agencies and the private sector are working hard to develop the tourism industry in a way that ensures the cultural and natural heritage that makes the country so special is protected and visited in a sustainable way.

You can help the government achieve their goal by supporting socially and environmentally responsible tourism initiatives in the country - many examples of which are given in this guidebook - and by respecting local customs and reciprocating the kindness extended to you by your gracious Lao hosts.

LAOS: TRAVELLER'S INFORMATION

Visas & Border Crossings

To enter the country, visitors need a passport with at least six months validity.

Thirty day visas are available from Lao embassies and consulates abroad (see <http://www.laoembassy.com/news/embassyabroad.htm> for addresses) or alternatively, visas may be obtained on arrival at the following ten international border crossings:

1. Boten in Luang Namtha (Laos-China)
2. Houy Xay in Bokeo (Laos-Thailand)
3. Na Meo in Houaphan (Laos-Vietnam)
4. Namkhan in Xieng Khouang (Laos-Vietnam)
5. Nam Phao in Bolikhamxay (Laos-Vietnam)
6. Thakek in Khammouane (Laos-Thailand)
7. Na Phao in Khammouane (Laos-Vietnam)
8. Dene Savan (Laos-Vietnam)
9. Dan Savanh in Savannakhet (Laos-Thailand)
10. Vang Tao in Champasak (Laos-Thailand)

If you already have a visa you may also enter Laos from Cambodia at the Veun Kham border crossing. Visa extensions are possible and best handled by one of the many tour companies in Vientiane, Luang Prabang or Pakse.

With the enactment of the ASEAN Tourism Agreement, ASEAN nations are moving towards establishing a visa-free tourism zone for ASEAN nationals. If you are a citizen of an ASEAN country, check with the Lao Embassy in your country to learn whether or not you require a visa to enter Laos. Note if you apply for a visa on arrival you will need two passport-size photos to complete your application form.

Getting There & Away

Laos can be reached by land, air and river from the neighbouring countries of Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and China. There is also



Nam Meo border crossing

now a direct air-link from Kuala Lumpur several times per week with Air Asia. There is regular air service to Laos on Thai International, Vietnam Airlines, Lao Airlines, China Southern and Bangkok Airways. The busiest entry-exit point is the Friendship Bridge which connects Vientiane to Nong Khai in Thailand. Another popular overland border crossing is at Houy Xay which links Northern Thailand's Chiang Rai province to north western Laos at the centre of the famed Golden Triangle.

Getting around Laos is becoming more and more convenient each year following major road and airport upgrades. There is a daily bus service from Vientiane to all major provincial capitals and local buses and *song taew* available to more remote districts and villages with road access.

Lao Airlines has flights to many domestic destinations and a number of regional capitals. The international airports in Vientiane, Pakse and Luang Prabang have regular service to major cities in the region. From Wattay in Vientiane you can reach Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, Kunming, and Kuala Lumpur. Direct flights are also available to Luang Prabang from Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Another way to travel around Laos is by boat on the Mekong River or one of its many tributaries.

River Travel

Luang Prabang is commonly accessed by riverboat from Houy Xay, and if you are heading north to Luang Namtha, the two-day journey on the Namtha River is a memorable adventure that takes you through lush forest and requires an overnight stay in your boatman's home. There is regular boat service on the Mekong from Pakse to the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Wat Phou and throughout the Four Thousand Islands in the far south.

Basic Vocabulary

Sabai dii - Hello

Jao sabai dii bor? - Hello, how are you ?

Khop jai - Thank you

Thao dai? - How much ?

Bor - No

Jao - Yes

Dii - good

Bor dii - bad

Bor pen nyang - never mind / no problem

Jak moong hao pai ? - what time do we go ?

Meu nii - today

Meu eun - tomorrow

Meu laeng nii - this evening



Laos

Dawn sao - in the morning

Hong nam you sai ? - where is the bathroom ?

Khoi yark pai ban phak (Vayakone) - I want to go to the (Vayakone) guesthouse

Lao jep - he is hurt

Lao thong pai hong mor - he has to go to the hospital

Thanh mor - doctor

Talat sao - morning market

Haan ahaam - restaurant

Sentanhi lot mae - bus station

Sanam bin - airport

Khor beer neung keo - please, one (bottle of) beer

A tuktuk is waiting for passengers }





Commercial boat on the Nam Ou river

Neung – one
Song – two
Saam – three
Sii – four
Ha – five
Hok – six
Jet – seven
Paet – eight
Kao – nine
Sip – ten
Sip et – eleven
Sip song – sip kao = twelve - nineteen

Sao – twenty
Sao et – twenty one
Sao song – sao kao = twenty two – twenty nine
Saam sip – thirty
Sii sip – forty
Ha sip – fifty
Loy neung – one hundred
Song loy – two hundred
Phanh neung – one thousand
Ha phanh – five thousand
Sip phanh – ten thousand

Local Time

Lao time is GMT +7 hours. There is no daylight saving.

Working Hours

Government offices are open from 0830-1200pm and from 0100 - 4.30pm on Monday through Friday.

Private businesses are generally open later, especially restaurants and entertainment places which usually close around midnight at the latest.

Keeping Healthy

If you eat well cooked food, drink bottled water, stay hydrated and avoid being bitten by mosquitoes you should have little to worry about health wise in Laos. However, as the country has only basic health care you should check with your physician regarding which vaccinations and health precautions to take before coming.

The World Health Organisation also recommends a number of vaccinations for Southeast Asia. If you are taking any special medications be sure to bring along an adequate supply to last the length of your trip.

Malaria can be a problem especially in rural areas during the rainy season. If you get any sign of high fever, aches and pains, assume it is malaria and seek a blood test as soon as possible. All hospitals/clinics throughout Laos have experience with diagnosing and treating malaria.

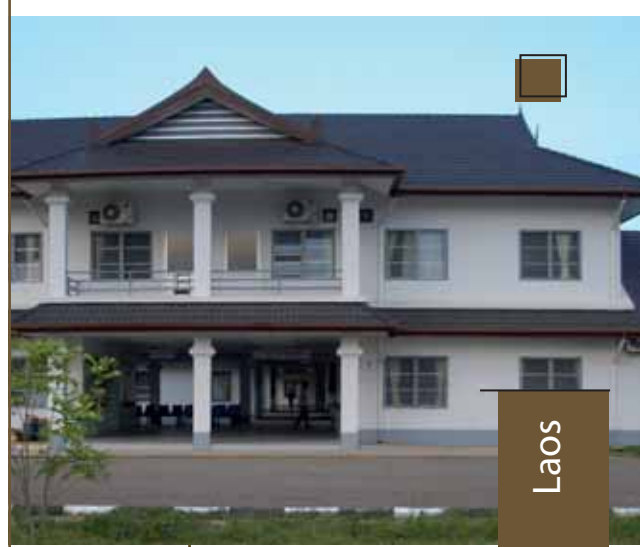
As rural pharmacies do not always stock the freshest or best quality drugs you may want to carry your own small first aid kit when travelling to remote areas. Ask your doctor for advice on what medicines to include.

If you do fall seriously ill first seek advice and treatment from a reputable doctor in Vientiane or Luang Prabang, or if that is not possible, go directly to Bangkok for medical treatment. Lao West Coast Helicopters based in Vientiane operate an emergency evacuation service but require either validation from an insurance company or other financial assurance before flying, so be sure to have your insurance details handy in the unlikely case you will need them. See important numbers below.

Money

The official currency of Laos is the Kip. Traveller's cheques and credit cards can be used to obtain cash at banks.

Market in Luang Prabang



Oudomxay Provincial Hospital

Credit cards are also accepted in major hotels and a limited number of upscale shopping establishments. At present international ATMs in Vientiane will only provide local currency.

Post and Internet Access

There are post offices in all provincial capitals where letters and parcels may be sent to your home country. At Vientiane's main post office there is a post restante service. Both DHL and FedEx have offices in Vientiane. Internet access is available in all major tourism centers and all but the most remote population centers.

Phone and Fax Services

International Direct Dial is widely available and you can send and receive faxes from all post offices and many private businesses. You can also purchase a local SIM card for your mobile phone. Country code: 856. Outgoing international code: 00.

Electricity

24-hour electricity is now available in all major population centers and many district capitals. Laos uses 220 volt AC.



Laos market colours

Embassies & Important Numbers

The following embassies are found in Vientiane (telephone code 021):

<p>Australia Nehru Street, Wat Phonsay area, Vientiane. Phone: 413 610, 413 805, 413 602</p>	<p>Malaysia That Luang Road, Ban Phonsay, Vientiane Phone : 414 205, 414 206, 414 732</p>
<p>British Trade Office Nehru Street, Wat Phonsay area, Vientiane Phone : 413 606</p>	<p>Mongolia Thadeua Road, Ban Beungkhayong, Vientiane Phone : 315 220</p>
<p>Brunei Darussalam No. 333, Unit 25, Ban Phonsay, Saysettha, Vientiane. Phone : 416 114, 414 169</p>	<p>Myanmar Sokpaluang Road, Vientiane Phone : 314 910, 314 912, 314 171</p>
<p>Cambodia Thadeua Road, Ban Thatkhao, Vientiane Phone : 314 952, 315 251, 315 252, 314 954</p>	<p>Philippines Salakoktance Road, Ban Watnak, Vientiane Phone : 315 179, Fax : 416 115</p>
<p>China Watnak Road, Ban Watnak Noi, Vientiane Phone : 315 100, 315 103, 315 105, 315 107</p>	<p>Poland Thadeua Road, Ban Watnak, Vientiane Phone : 312 086</p>
<p>Cuba 128 Ban Saphanthong Neua, Vientiane Phone : 312 904</p>	<p>Russia Ban Thaphalanxay, Vientiane Phone : 312 218, 312 219, 312 222, 312 223</p>
<p>France Setthathirat Road, Ban Sisakhet, Vientiane Phone : 215 253, 215 257, 215 258, 215 259</p>	<p>Singapore Ban Naxay, 12, Nongbone Road, Vientiane Phone : 416 860, Fax : 416 855</p>
<p>Germany Sokpaluang Road, Ban Sokpaluang, Vientiane Phone : 312 110, 312 111, 312 112, 312 113</p>	<p>Sweden Sokpaluang Road, Ban Watnak, Vientiane Phone : 315 018, 313 772, 315 003</p>
<p>India That Luang Road, Ban Phonsay, Vientiane Phone : 413 802</p>	<p>Thailand Phonkheng Road, Ban Phonsaat, Vientiane Phone : 214 580, 214 582, 214 583, 214 585</p>
<p>Indonesia Phonkheng Road, Ban Pholsaat, Vientiane Phone : 413 909, 413 910</p>	<p>United States Thatdam Bartholonie Road, Ban Thatdam, Vientiane Phone : 213 966, 212 581, 212 582, 212 585</p>
<p>Japan Sisangvone Road, Ban Sisangvone, Vientiane. Phone : 414 400, 414 402, 414 403, 315 031</p>	<p>Vietnam That Luang Road, Ban Phonsay, Vientiane Phone : 413 400, 413 401, 413 402, 413 403</p>
<p>Korea DPR Watnak Street, Ban Sisattanak, Vientiane Phone : 315 260</p>	

Important Contact Numbers

Fire

190 or 21-2707.

Police

Traffic Police : 191 or 21-2703. Friendship Bridge: Lao Immigration (24 hr) – 81-2040. Friendship Bridge: Thai Immigration (24 hr) – 00-66-42-420-244. Security Police of Vientiane Municipality (centre): 21-2706 (some can speak English).

Medical Treatment

Medical facilities in Laos are generally basic. Patients requiring hospitalisation for serious illness or injuries are usually referred to hospitals in Thailand.

Below are a list of medical facilities in Vientiane and Thailand.

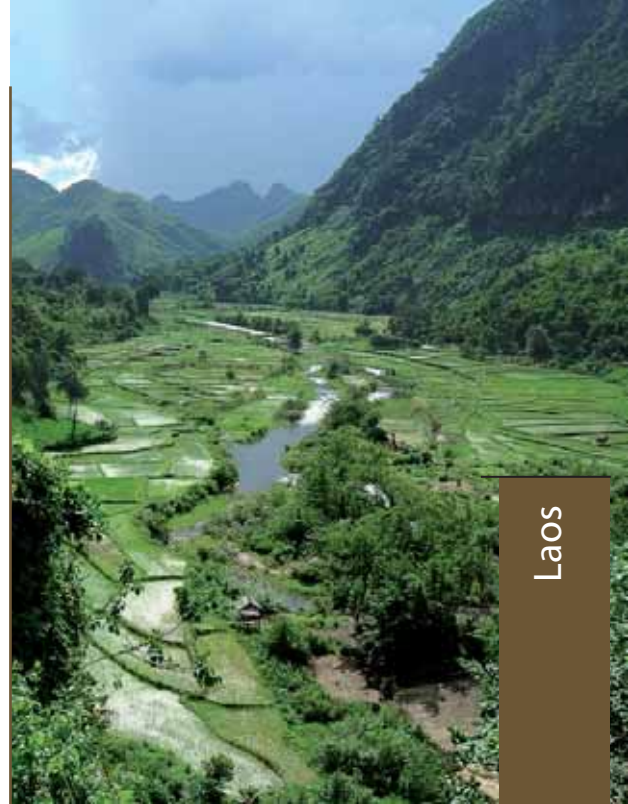
Hospitals and Clinics in Vientiane


In Vientiane there are several public hospitals that are staffed and rostered 24 hours a day and can assist in the event of an emergency:

1. Mahosot International Clinic
tel. 021 214022
2. Mahosot Hospital
tel. 856 021 214018
3. Sethathirat Hospital,
tel. 021 351156 or 351158 (has ambulance)
4. The Russian Friendship Hospital
tel. 021 710006
5. Friendship Hospital (aka 150 Beds)
tel. 021 413302 (has ambulance)
6. Police Hospital 109
tel. 021 212537
7. Military Hospital 103
tel. 021 312127, 312134
8. Municipal Ambulance Service
tel. 195 - suitable for moderate conditions only

The Australian Embassy Clinic in Vientiane is staffed by Australian doctors and offers medical services for citizens from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada and Papua New Guinea.

It is open from 0830 – 1230 pm and from 1330 – 1700pm, Mon – Fri. Contact them on tel. 856 (0)21 413600 to make an appointment.



 On the road to Houaphan, northeast Laos.

Laos

Hospitals in Thailand

Just across the border from Vientiane in Nong Kai there is:

1. Wattana Hospital
tel. 0066 42 465201 or 0066 42 465202
2. Nong Kai Public Hospital
tel. 0066 42 461088

At Udon Thani in northeast Thailand (approx 1.5 hours drive from Vientiane) there is:

1. Aek Udon Hospital
tel. 0066 42 342555 or 00661 9540954
2. Udon Wattana Hospital
tel. 0066 42 241031

In Bangkok there are numerous excellent facilities including:

1. Bumrungrad Hospital
tel. 0066 2 6671000 or 0066 2 6671234
2. Bangkok Nursing Home (BNH) Hospital
tel. 0066 2 6862700
3. Bangkok General Hospital
tel. 0066 2 3180066
4. Samitivej Hospital
tel. 0066 2 3920011

Lao West Coast Helicopters in Vientiane can arrange emergency medical evacuations to most parts of Laos. However they require validation from a medical insurance provider or payment guarantees before lifting off. Office tel: 021 512023 / 512054; Mobile phone: 020 5514184; After hours: 020 5574185.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

General Advice

When in Laos, try and do as the as the Laotian people do. The big three are not to touch heads, lose your cool or flash your flesh excessively! The rest is about common sense manners, leaving shoes outside a house, accepting hosts' greetings and not upsetting religious feelings. The Lao people are very friendly and hospitable. Making a minimum effort to respect the culture will make your trip smooth and memorable. Here are a few of the most important do's and don'ts:

Welcome: a kiss or embrace from a stranger is rather shocking and even insulting to Lao people. Traditionally, Lao people use the *nop* on meeting and using it will win you immediate friends if performed sincerely. To perform a *nop* raise your hands in a praying gesture. The higher you go, the more respect you show, but don't be over the top! A handshake will also suffice for men but try also to use the Lao greeting of '*sabai dil*'.

Feelings in public: public displays of affection are taboo in Lao society, so it's best not to cause shock or embarrassment by kissing or cuddling in front of people. Modest dress and discreet behavior will ensure you don't attract unwanted attention or embarrass others.



Foot and Head: in Buddhism and general Asian society the head is very important to the soul and its purity while the feet are for walking on the earth. Raising your feet to head height, putting them on furniture or pointing them at people is taken as a deliberate insult. Remember not to gesture with your feet or touch an Asian head.

Shouting: never raise your voice to Lao people as they never react well to it. Even shouting to friends or for taxis will cause shock and worry. Laos is a land of calm and patience and shattering the peace will only cause consternation.

Appearance: bodily hygiene and cleanliness are highly regarded in Lao society and is taken to be a sign of self respect. Unkempt or unwashed people are viewed with distaste.

In a Lao house: always remove your shoes before entering a house and at a gathering be sure to lower your head low when walking in front of those who are sitting, especially older people, as a sign of respect. Never step over sitting people or food as this is seen to be very insulting.

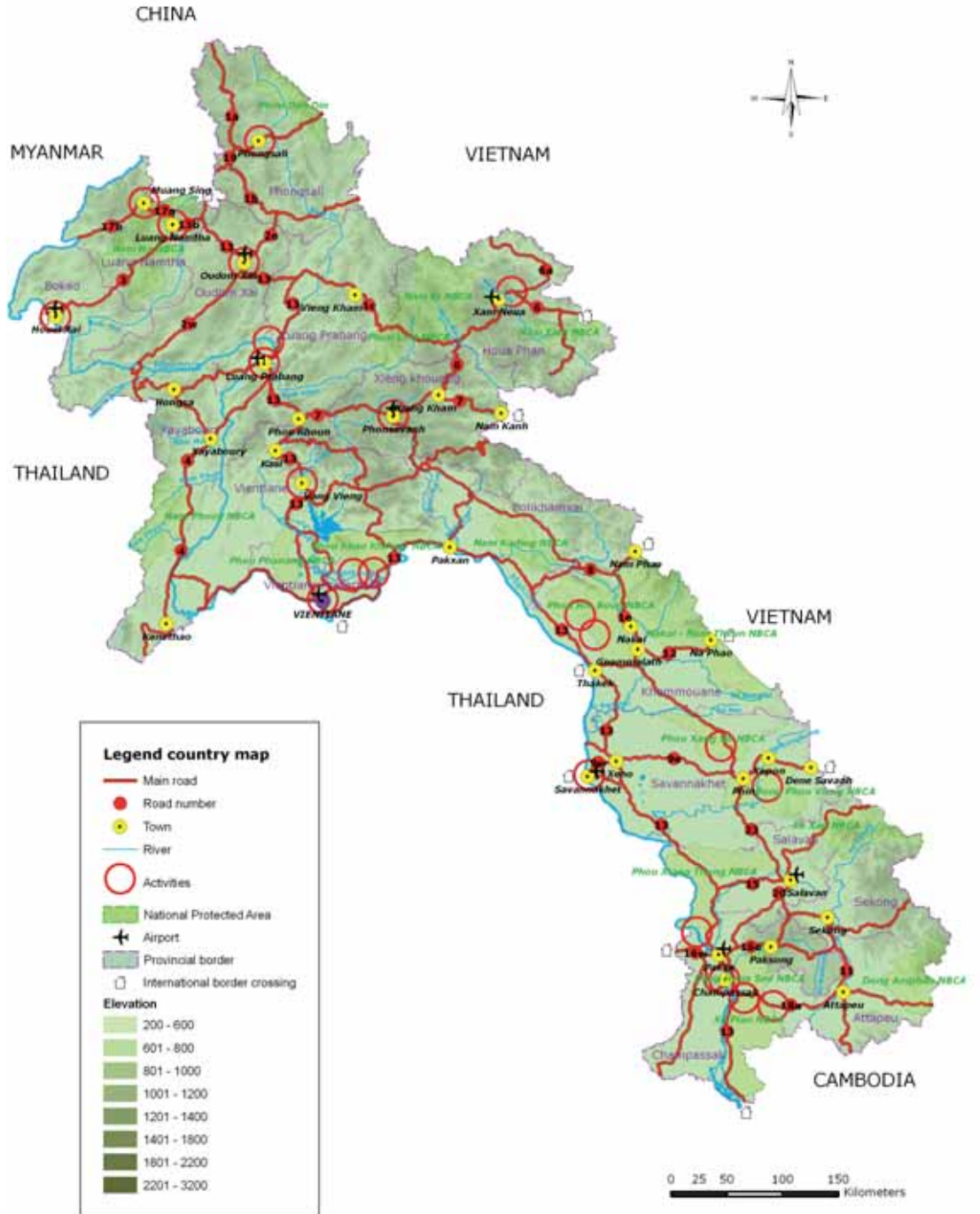
Religion: religion is a major part of daily life for most Lao people. When visiting temples and shrines show your respect by keeping your voice low and dressing neatly - never go shirtless or wear shorts or mini skirts. Watch how the local people behave and emulate them. It is acceptable to wear shoes when walking around a temple compound but not inside the chapel where the principal Buddha image is kept. Every Buddha image is regarded as a sacred object, no matter how big, small, old or new. Never climb onto a Buddha image to take a photograph. Keep your head lower than the Buddha images and monks. Buddhist monks must not be touched by a woman or to accept anything from the hand of one. If a woman gives anything to a monk she must first hand it to a man who then presents it. And lastly try not to turn your back on a Buddha image as it is seen as a sign of disrespect.

Environment: please do your bit to keep Laos clean and provide a good example to young people by not littering.

Drugs: the penalties for drug use can be severe in Laos and, more importantly, provides a destructive example to Lao youth.

And finally ... smile a lot and try to speak some Lao and you will be sure to make lots of friends and have a wonderful time.

Respect for elders is important in Laos.



Trek the Akha Hills

-  Activity: The Akha Experience
 Location: Muang Sing District, Luang Namtha
 Tip: Moderate to good fitness levels required

Visit eight remote Akha villages on an easy to moderate three-day guided hike that leaves a positive legacy.

The experience: Visitors are guided on a three day trek through the forests and countryside of Muang Sing where they will pass through eight different Akha villages. You'll get a warm welcome. The Akha people of Luang Namtha province are among the most culturally colourful, hospitable and traditional of the minority ethnic groups in Laos. During the trek you can eat traditional foods with the local people, share in their daily lives and sleep in their community lodges. This trek offers a rare opportunity for those who wish to meet villagers and experience their way of life in small groups with little impact. Come away with the added satisfaction of knowing that your participation in this venture has made a positive difference to the welfare of the Akha communities you visited and to the conservation of their unique and threatened culture.

Share in the Akhas' daily lives



Warm welcomes



Forest insights

How it helps: The Akha Experience is a community owned and operated business. The eight villages involved have received training and support from GTZ (German Development Assistance Program) and its government partners to develop their own tourism management board together with systems for collecting taxes, accounting for revenue and distributing benefits equitably among the member communities. They sell the tour on a contractual basis to a reputable, private travel company in Laos and regularly monitor the impacts and quality of their product together with their partners.

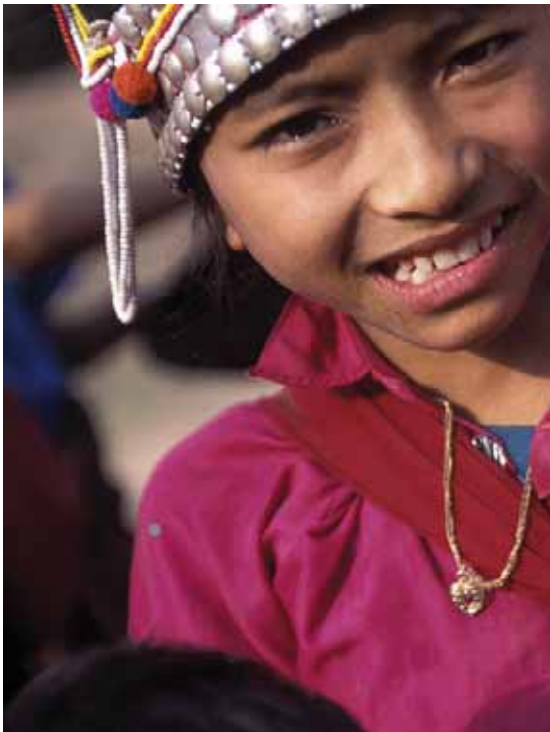
It is the first public/private partnership of its kind in Laos that aims to empower local communities to operate and manage their own tourism business for the purpose of poverty alleviation. The communities receive income from providing accommodation, food, hospitality and guiding services, handicraft sales and for their time taken to involve visitors in their traditional livelihood activities. Importantly, they have also received valuable knowledge and skills from the project, a sense of self sufficiency and a renewed incentive to conserve their culture and natural environment. GTZ has been working with the Akha communities in Muang Sing since 1992.

Contact information




Exotissimo Laos
 Pangkham Street, Vientiane, Lao PDR
 Tel: (+856) [0]2124 1861/2
 Fax: (+856) [0]2126 2001
 E-mail: laosales@exotissimo.com
 Web: www.exotissimo.com

GTZ, Muang Sing
 Contact: Meike Mumm
 Tel: (+856) [0]8121 2381
 Fax: (+856) [0]8121 2383
 E-mail: meike@gtzrural.org

Further information can be found on:
www.ecotourismlaos.com/activities/akha_experience.htm



Remote Attapeu by Foot and Boat

-  Activity: Ban Mai Village homestay, boating & trekking tours
-  Location: Ban Mai village, Attapeu province
-  Tip: Take binoculars to observe birdlife. For village bathing, men bring shorts, women a sarong.



Up the Xe Pian river

This deep south province is acclaimed for its variety of indigenous forest and birdlife.

The experience: Renowned for its little known hilltribes, unexplored forests, lakes, waterfalls and the war torn Ho Chi Minh Trail, Attapeu is one of the least visited and yet most fascinating provinces in Laos. The two-day, overnight trip to the village of Ban Mai on the edge of the Xe Pian National Protected Area is the first community-based ecotourism experience available for visitors to Attapeu offered by the local tourism office. The tour takes you 48km from Attapeu town through the remote countryside to Ban Mai on the Xe Pian River stopping to visit the Nonglom Lake on the way at the foot of the Bolaven plateau. After arriving at the village a local guide will take you by longtail boat up the beautiful Xe Pian River to the Tad Samongphak waterfall and from there by foot through the forest to the Tad Saepha waterfall.

Ban Mai house



The Xe Pian River is one of the few lowland rivers left in Southeast Asia that retains intact riverine gallery forest. Birdlife is colourful and abundant and you may even catch a glimpse of the endangered and secretive white-winged duck or masked finfoot. Return by boat to Ban Mai village for an evening bath in the river and a relaxing traditional dinner with your family host.

How it helps: This pilot ecotour has been developed by the Attapeu Provincial Tourism Office in partnership with Ban Mai and with assistance from CUSO - a Canadian assistance organisation. The goal is to develop a successful example of low impact ecotourism which benefits local people and which can be used by the tourism office as a model for developing further ecotourism opportunities in the province.

The people of Ban Mai receive direct income from your stay in the village and through the employment of guides and use of their boats on the Xe Pian River. A village fund has been established from a small levy added to the price of the tour to benefit both Ban Mai and surrounding villages. Group sizes are also limited in the interest of boat safety and to enhance the experience for both visitors and village hosts.



Waterfall in the Xe Pian headwaters


Booking information


Bookings should be made at least two days in advance (to allow the village to be contacted and guides and boats arranged) through the Provincial Tourism Office.
Tel: (+856) (0) 36 211056 or through the Attapeu Travel Company. Tel: (+856) (0) 36 211204.
E-mail: lbvt@laotel.com



Peace on the River Bend

 Activity: Ban Pako Eco Lodge

 Location: One hour south of Vientiane city

 Tip: Bring sturdy walking shoes and a bathing costume – or just a good book

Relax by the river, or stir yourself to trek, bird watch or explore an archaeologically rich corner of Laos.

The experience: Within an hour's travel of Vientiane city, Ban Pako Ec Lodge is the ideal retreat for those seeking a few days peace and quiet in the countryside. The solar powered and traditionally designed lodge sits on a bend of the Nam Ngum River with beautiful views of forest and distant mountains. Whether you wish to simply sit with a good book on the veranda of your bungalow, float gently down the river on a tube, go bird watching or take an herbal steam bath among the trees, Ban Pako is a place for relaxing and enjoying nature in comfort. It is also a place of great history. Two thousand years ago the original residents of Ban Pako made pottery, iron implements and textiles the remains of which are still being carefully excavated by archaeologists to this day.

A place for quiet reflections



Bungalow interior

Guests can view some of these artefacts and learn about the fascinating history of the area which has now become an internationally recognised cultural site. For more actively inclined guests, there are mountain bikes to ride and guided treks can be arranged into the surrounding countryside, temples and villages and to the wild elephant observation tower in nearby Phou Khao Khuay National Protected Area (see page xx).

How it helps: Ban Pako Eco Lodge has been active in the protection and restoration of 128 hectares of surrounding forest and is seeking to expand this area to counter ever increasing deforestation locally. The owners have also taken a great interest in conserving the archaeological site at Ban Pako through facilitating professional research and ensuring that important areas are protected from disturbance.

The lodge makes an effort to optimize benefits to surrounding communities by employing local staff and, where possible, using local services for transport and construction and by purchasing local food and other goods. The eco lodge is powered by solar energy and is constructed with local materials in a traditional style.

Location

The lodge is located about 50 km from Vientiane. Take Route 13 from Vientiane to the south, turn left at the sign 24 km out of town and follow the main road. At Som Sa Mai village take a 25 minute boat ride down the river to the lodge. There are also buses that leave from the bus station at the morning market in Vientiane.


Booking information

The Burapha Group
46 Phone Kheng Road, P.O. Box 3144, Vientiane, Laos
Tel: (Ban Pako) (+856) [0] 30 5257937
Tel: (Burapha Group) (+856) [0] 21 451841/2
Fax: (+856) [0] 21 451844
For further information and to make online e-mail bookings / enquiries visit www.banpako.com.

Mekong's Island of Culture

 Activity: Don Daeng Island

 Location: Champasak province

 Tip: Advance booking for the community lodge is recommended.

On the Mekong river, explore Don Daeng island, an outpost of shrines, beaches and weaving on the doorstep of Vat Phou World Heritage site.

The experience: Don Daeng is a small, idyllic island on the Mekong River not far from historic Champasak town, gateway to the Vat Phou World Heritage Site. Travellers can stop off on the island to relax and enjoy Lao rural life before or after visiting the Vat Phou temple complex or en route to the 4,000 islands in the deep south. Accommodation is offered in a community lodge or with local families. Visitors can spend the day walking or biking around the island's tree-shaded paths and sandy beaches, visiting the many cultural sites and sampling its abundant fruits and fresh fish.

Local kids



Don Daeng island beach

There are ancient stupas on the island dating back to the era of Vat Phou, plus Buddhist temples, basket weaving villages and a protected community forest. Guided tours can be arranged to the various attractions on the island through the community lodge or your homestay family, including a boat trip to the little visited Angkorian Tomo temple hidden in forest on the nearby mainland. Higher-end accommodation on the island is also available at the privately run La Folie Lodge.

How it helps: The community on the island benefits directly through providing accommodation, guiding and lodge hospitality services, boat transport, bike rentals and handicrafts. The Village Committee oversees the tourism activities on the island and charges a 5% tax on all revenue earned by the community members for contribution to a village development fund. Service groups have also been established to promote the equitable sharing of the benefits of tourism. The island's small scale, community-based tourism enterprise provides a successful demonstration of the type of sustainable tourism that is being encouraged inside the Vat Phou - Champasak World Heritage area.

Location and booking information

From Pakse drive south on Route 13 and turn right at kilometre 30. Follow the road to Ban Mouang village from where you can hire a boat to the island. From the island it takes just 40 minutes to reach Vat Phou by boat and tuk tuk. If you have already visited Vat Phou and are in Champasak town, go to the District Tourism Office to arrange boat transport to the island.

Advance booking of the community lodge is recommended through either the Champasak Eco Guide Service (located in the Provincial Tourism Office in Pakse) or Champasak town tourism office. Tours can be also arranged through Green Discovery or Lane Xang Travel in Pakse.


For more information see

www.ecotourismlaos.com/activities/dondaengisland.htm

Remote River Insights

 Activity: Kamu Lodge.

 Location: On the Mekong river, three hours boat ride north of Luang Prabang town.

 Tip: Visit any time but October to February is best (when you'll need a warm jacket).

Find seclusion and the chance to experience the tranquility of Laotian rural life while staying in the comfort of a top-end lodge.

The experience: Accessible only by boat, Kamu Lodge is found on the banks of the Mekong river in a remote valley of rice fields, small villages and forested mountains. Accommodation is provided in traditionally furnished, safari-style tents each fitted with their own stone bathroom, hot shower, solar power and private veranda overlooking the river. The bamboo terraced restaurant serves delicious Lao cuisine prepared with locally caught fish and organically produced vegetables and fruits. The local Khmu people are very happy for you to visit their villages and experience their way of life. You can wander through the countryside by yourself or, with the assistance of English speaking guides, learn from the local people how to weave, fish, harvest rice and even pan for gold. Guides from a local Hmong village are also available to take you trekking into the surrounding mountains to visit caves and waterfalls and learn about the forest products and traditional medicines that sustain their life.

Rice field sala



Luxury tent accommodation

How it helps: The Kamu Lodge recognizes that its success is dependent on building goodwill and beneficial relationships with the local communities in the area. Through the various guided activities developed between the lodge and communities, guests are encouraged to engage with villagers in a meaningful and fun way while also learning about the culture and way of life of the Khmu and Hmong people.

Local people are employed as cooks, guides and housekeepers and the lodge donates money into a village development fund for distribution to surrounding communities. They have also helped with improvements to the local school and provide English language training to the pupils. Kamu Lodge makes an effort to fit in with the environment and reduce its impacts by using local building materials, traditional designs, recycling waste and generating solar power.



Tent interior

Location and booking information

Kamu Lodge is accessed by Luang Prabang. Visitors depart by slow boat at 0830 from Wat Xieng Thong pier and journey for three hours up the Mekong River, visiting the Pak Ou caves en route, before arriving at the lodge.

Reservations can be made by contacting Kamu Lodge at its Vientiane office on 06/044 Pangkham Street.

Tel: (+856) [0] 21 241861 / 242849

Fax: [0] 21 262001 / 252382

Or at the Luang Prabang office on 44/03 BanVat Nong, Khem Kong Road. Tel (+856) [0] 71 254698 - Fax: [0] 71 252879.

Alternatively send an e-mail to info@kاملodge.com

For further information visit www.kاملodge.com

Food That Gets Kids Off the Streets

 Activity: Makphet Restaurant & Peuan Mit Programme.

 Location: Vientiane city.

 Tip: Around town, don't give money to street kids begging.



Former street kids at work

Enjoy great food that helps keep kids off the streets in Vientiane.

The experience: It's an uncomfortable experience to see bright-eyed, young children begging on the streets. Often our first reaction is to give money or to buy their postcards and flowers. But does this really help? Chances are it will only encourage the kids to stay on the street where they have little hope for a better life and are vulnerable to abuse. A great way to help is to visit the Makphet ('hot chilli') restaurant in Vientiane run by Friends International. The restaurant is staffed by former street children and youth at risk (all over 15 years old). It offers delicious Lao food in a modern setting prepared with the freshest local produce under the highest standards of hygiene. Check out also the Noi Noi ('small small')

Friends Shop above the restaurant which sells handicrafts made from recycled materials by the parents of former street children. The income the parents make from selling these products means that their children can go to school instead of working on the streets.

How it helps: The Makphet restaurant provides vulnerable youth with job skills and a new chance in life while at the same time helping to generate income for Friends International to run its Peuan Mit ('close friend') programme in Vientiane. This globally inspired programme offers counselling services, emergency lodging, vocational training, medical care, small business development assistance and life skills support to both street and at risk children and their parents so they can move away from a life on the streets.

You can also make donations to the Peuan Mit programme and know that your money will be making a real difference to those who need it. Currently the programme, with the help of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, is supporting up to 1,000 street and at-risk children a month.



Location and contact information

The Makphet restaurant is located in a pleasant garden setting opposite Vat Inpeng temple on Sethathirath Road not far from the central Nam Phou fountain. The mechanical workshop is found on T2 Road, #366, Ban Donmieng. Ask at the restaurant for details.

Mak Phet Restaurant

Tel: (+856) [0] 21 260587 / [0] 20 7821949

Peuan Mit Centre. Tel: (+856) [0] 21 261389


E-mail: makphet@friends-international.org


Web: www.friends-international.org and

www.childsafe-international.org.

Classic Laotian Silk

 Activity: Lao Textiles & Mulberries.

 Location: Vientiane city and Luang Prabang town.

 Tip: Think of classic silk as something that can be hung on your wall as art.

The purchase of fashionable silks sustains dozens of village weavers and a noble tradition.

The experience: If you are looking to buy an exquisite example of Lao silk weaving, pay a visit to Lao Textiles in Vientiane. Established in 1990 by Carol Cassidy, Lao Textiles is among the first private companies in post-war Laos specialising in 100% hand-woven silk using traditional weaving techniques such as brocade, tapestry and Ikat. At her weaving studio you can choose from a variety of products including complex wall hangings, limited edition scarves and shawls, pillows and custom interior fabrics. Carol and her team of 50 professional skilled artisans weave silk textiles that combine traditional Lao and modern designs in unique colours recognised internationally for their creativity, craftsmanship and quality.

Traditional weaving product



Lao Textiles in Vientiane

Another socially responsible silk textile producer well worth checking out is Mulberries, a not-for-profit company that specializes in high quality, naturally dyed and handmade Lao silk products produced by rural women. Mulberries has stores both in Vientiane and Luang Prabang – see below for details.

How it helps: Lao Textiles adheres to the principles of fair trade ensuring its artisans and silk producers receive a fair price for their products and skills. Raw silk is sourced from communities in three provinces from northern Laos where rural households earn additional income by weaving a unique collection of “Mulberry Farm” scarves and shawls for sale in outlets around Laos. Lao Textiles has provided training and secure employment for 50 staff in Vientiane over the last two decades. Mulberries has formed business partnerships with over 200 village families providing them with training, tools and a secure market for their weaving products through their shops. The company promotes the use of traditional silkworm rearing and weaving techniques and the use of natural dyes to reduce the impacts of dyeing chemicals on the environment. The founders of Mulberries have a vision to provide vulnerable, rural villages with an income generating alternative to opium production and harmful slash and burn agricultural practices.

Location and contact information

Lao Textiles is located in a historic French colonial villa and garden in Ban Mixai, central Vientiane opposite the Vayakone Guesthouse. Workshop and gallery hours are 0800-1200 and 1400-1700 Monday-Friday, and 0800-1200 or by appointment Saturdays.

Tel: (+856) [0] 21 212123 or (+856) [0] 20 770 2966.

Fax (+856) [0] 21 21 6205; P O Box 5088, Vientiane, Laos.

E-mail: phone@laotextiles.com.

Also see www.laotextiles.com for further information.

Mulberries has a shop in Vientiane opposite the Douang Deuane Hotel on Nokeo Kummene Road (tel: (+856) [0] 21 241217 / 561271) and next to the post office above Joma Café on Chao Fa Ngum Road in Luang Prabang (tel: (+856) [0] 71 254594). Opening hours are from 1000-1800, Monday-Saturday.


E-mail: info@mulberries.org. Web: www.mulberries.org.



Treks, River Dips and Rituals

 Activity: Muang Ngoi Trekking & Kayaking.

 Location: Ban Ngoi Kao, Luang Prabang province.

 Tip: Steep climbs make the Kiew Kan trail challenging.

Riverside bungalows are your base camp for treks to remote Khmu villages.

The experience: Ban Ngoi Kao is a friendly Lao village situated on the banks of the Nam Ou River among forested mountains in Ngoi district of Luang Prabang. Only recently 'discovered' by travellers it has become an ecotourism gateway to trekking and kayaking in this remote and beautiful corner of northern Laos. The village has bungalow accommodation on the river and provides a staging point for treks into the surrounding mountains, villages, caves and waterfalls and for kayaking on the scenic Nam Ou River. Lao Youth Travel runs a number of one- to three-day guided trekking and kayaking trips from Ban Ngoi Kao in small groups that aim to give guests an authentic cultural experience in rural Laos.

On the first day of the Kiew Kan trek you will explore large caves that were used by local people as bomb shelters during the war and trek through primary forest and sheer limestone mountains to arrive at Ban Kiew Kan, a remote Khmu village renowned for its basket weaving and hospitality. Enjoy a cooling dip in a natural spring, a traditional baci blessing ritual and locally prepared Khmu food before retiring to the community lodge for the night. On the second day visitors descend back



Kayaking on the Nam Ou river

through the forest and along shady streams stopping for refreshments in the village of Ban Hadsapeuy before kayaking or boating down a spectacular stretch of the Nam Ou River back to Ban Ngoi Kao village.

How it helps: With assistance from the Mekong Tourism Development Project, the villages of Ngoi district have partnered with the locally operated Lao Youth Travel to develop a number of ecotourism products that are designed foremost to benefit local people. The communities provide accommodation, food and sell handicrafts and have established village funds from tourism revenue to ensure benefits are spread among all the families. Eighty percent of your money stays in the local economy. Trips are operated in small groups to enhance the experience for visitors and to minimize the 'footprint' on the environment and local cultures.



Village on banks of Nam Ou

Contact and booking information

Lao Youth Travel, Luang Prabang Branch, # 410
Visounarath Road, Tel/Fax: (+856) [0] 71 253340,
E-mail: youtheco@laotel.com or visit the Lao Youth
Travel head office in Vientiane on Fa Ngum Road.
Tel: (+856) [0] 21 240939. Fax: [0] 21 213037.

Travellers can depart from Luang Prabang with Lao Youth Travel or find their own way to Muang Ngoi.

For further information and directions on getting there see:

www.laoyouthtravel.com
www.ecotourismlaos.com/activities/muangngoitrek.htm.



Sleep in the Treetops

 Activity: The Gibbon Experience.

 Location: Bokeo Nature Reserve.

 Tip: This is a deep forest experience, not to be taken lightly.



The gibbon's home

Sleep in canopy tree houses alongside black gibbons.

The experience: The local guides from the Gibbon Experience will take you where no one else can -- into the secretive world of the endangered black gibbon. For two days you can live in the tree tops of the Bokeo Nature Reserve and fly through the canopy on a network of 'zip' lines, an aerial highway that allows you to explore the gibbons' home while giving you a unique opportunity to meet this beautiful and rare primate face to face. Spacious tree houses with semi-private bedrooms and open fire kitchens provide the accommodation and comfortable 'hides' from which to observe wildlife in the forest canopy. Bird and insect life abound and at night the forest comes alive with the scuffling noises and calls of its nocturnal residents.

If you are lucky at night you might see the bizarre, wide-eyed slow loris, another rare primate that shares the forest with the gibbons.

Slow loris



Below on the forest floor there are signs of sun bears, deer, wild pigs and, occasionally, of tiger and elephant as they pass through the reserve.

To sleep in the forest canopy and wake to the haunting calls of the gibbons and the dawn chorus of birdsong is surely one of the highlights of the Gibbon Experience. Visitors can choose between a two-day trip into the canopy with the freedom to explore the forest on foot or a three-day trek through the reserve to a remote tree house perched above a waterfall complete with a swimming hole and sunset views over the distant valleys.

How it helps: The Gibbon Experience is the vision of Animo, a conservation-based ecotourism company that seeks to conserve the forests and wildlife of Laos in a way which can be sustained by the local people themselves. The surrounding communities were involved in the design and construction of the tree houses and network of zip lines. With the approval of the provincial government of Bokeo, they have established the 123,000-hectare Bokeo Nature Reserve. The income from ecotourism is used directly for paying the monthly salaries of a team of forest guards to patrol the reserve and monitor its wildlife, and for employing local people as guides and full-time staff.

Contact information and booking


You can make a booking for the Gibbon Experience by telephone: (+856) [0] 84 212021 or e-mail: experience@gibbonx.org.


Or visit the Animo office in Houay Xai town in Bokeo Province, located between the BAP guesthouse and Riverview Restaurant.

For further information see: www.gibbonx.org.

See the Ruins of 'Aran'

 Activity : North by North East Travel.

 Location: Phou Hin Poun National Protected Area, Khammouane province.

 Tip: Take strap-on style sandals or tennis shoes for river walking.



Along the Hin Poun river

Hike along a river, emerge from caves to see the ancient ruins of an ancient city, or volunteer for village projects.

The experience: This four-day trekking and river boat adventure will take you into the remote reaches of the Phou Hin Poun National Protected Area. The trip begins with a drive high up into the mountains of Khammouane province to the town of Khoun Kham. On the way you will be rewarded with stunning views over the karst limestone landscape and a chance to try out the famous 'bomb boats' - local craft ingeniously constructed from large fuel tanks dropped by American bombers during the war.

On the second day you will trek to a waterfall in the forest and then travel by longtail boat down the Nam Hin Poun River for several hours to the village Ban Na Kok. There will be a chance to see wildlife along the way, such as langur monkeys, and frequent stops to enjoy the mountain scenery or to take a swim in the clear river.

Discoveries around the next bend



You will overnight in the friendly village of Ban Na Nok and on the third day rise early to trek to the Tam Heup cave that passes for a kilometre through a mountain to reveal a secluded valley that hides the ruins of the ancient city some people call "Aran". On your final evening villagers may say farewell by enacting a traditional baci blessing ceremony. On the final morning, depart by boat down the Hin Poun river and onto the town of Thakek on the banks of the Mekong.

How it helps: The company makes special efforts to raise funds and enlist the skills of volunteers to assist the communities they visit with development assistance. Ban Na Kok for example has recently received help to build a water wheel and charcoal purification plant to pump clean water to the 45 households in the village.

Travellers with North by North East can also 'adopt a village' by donating funds to assist a dozen remote communities in central Laos with medical care and school improvements. Alternatively, if you wish to help out with your hands then look up their 'voluntourism' programme which offers travellers to Laos and Thailand a unique opportunity to experience life in rural communities.

Visitor comment: "I've tasted remoteness before, but this is different – and almost magical. At times it feels like I'm walking through a dream"
-- Rolf Potts (Conde Naste Traveler magazine)


Contact information and booking

North by Northeast Tours, 746/1 Sunthornvichit Rd, Amphur Muang, Nakorn Phanom, Thailand 48000.
Tel: (+66) [0] 42 513572. Fax: (+66) [0] 42 513573.
For further information and to make e-mail enquiries and bookings see: www.north-by-north-east.com

Discover secrets of lao textiles

 Activity: Ock Pop Tok Textile Gallery and Weaving Centre.

 Location: Luang Prabang town.

 Tip: Show commitment by taking a weaving course.



Idyllic weaving location

See artisans turn raw silk into classy finished textiles and learn some techniques, or just visit the fabric gallery.

The experience: Ock Pop Tok, 'East Meets West', is the innovative creation of two local women with a passion for weaving and a vision for showcasing and selling Lao's textiles to the world. Fusing the best of western and traditional Lao design and techniques, their weaving centre in Luang Prabang produces some of the finest silk textiles in the country. Visitors to the centre can take a guided tour to observe the local artisans at work transforming raw silk into finished textiles and can even provide their own designs for the artisans to weave. After the tour, peruse the gallery for any textiles you may wish to purchase and enjoy lunch or coffee in the centre's café on the banks of the Mekong River. For enthusiasts, Ock Pop Tok also offers classes with their artisans (ranging from half a day to a week) in the crafts of silk dyeing and weaving and will soon offer tours and homestays in the weaving villages they work with.

To complement its workshop the founders of Ock Pop Tok recently established the non-profit textile gallery "Fibre2Fabric" in the old quarter of Luang Prabang. The gallery hosts three exhibitions of hand crafted textiles each year to promote the art of weaving and its cultural significance to the Lao people.

Fabric of society explained



How it helps: Ock Pop Tok has a mission to promote Laos and its textiles internationally through exhibitions, training programmes and the development of a sustainable business that directly benefits local artisans and their families. The centre employs some 30 full-time staff and works directly with over 150 women from seven rural villages comprising a variety of ethnic groups throughout the provinces of northern Laos.

The business adheres to the principles of fair and sustainable trade by providing its artisans with guidance and training in product development, a secure and expanding market and a fair price for their textiles that is significantly higher than that usually offered in rural markets. A percentage of sales revenue is channelled back into training and support for new and existing artisans. The centre also holds training and workshops for organizations and projects that wish to promote textile production as part of their rural livelihood development programmes in Laos.

By purchasing products from the Ock Pop Tok gallery or participating in its tours and weaving classes you will be making a direct contribution to the welfare of rural women artisans and the preservation of Lao's weaving culture.

Location and contact information

Ock Pop Tok Weaving Centre can be found 2 km outside of Luang Prabang on the banks of the Mekong River while its sister Fibre2Fabric gallery is located next to the Ock Pop Tok shop in the old quarter of Luang Prabang. Ask your hotel or travel agent for directions.

For general enquiries tel: (+856) [0] 71 254406 / 253219 or e-mail info@ockpoptok.com. For further information about the organization, its products and the activities it offers to visitors see www.ockpoptok.com.

The Ultimate Sanctuary

- 📖 **Activity:** Phou Hin Poun National Protected Area.
- 📍 **Location:** Near Thakek town, Khammouane province.
- 💡 **Tip:** Almost all trips here visit caves, so bring a torch and a camera with a powerful flash.

From day trips to extended deep forest excursions, Phou Hin Poun might be the ultimate Laotian nature experience.

The experience: Phou Hin Poun National Protected Area is a premium ecotourism and adventure destination in Laos famed for its jagged limestone mountains, labyrinth of caves (many containing Buddhist relics), crystal clear springs, undisturbed forest and rare wildlife. There are many options for the visitor ranging from day trips to nearby caves and cultural sites in and around the protected area to guided adventures into the remotest parts of the park for up to a week. Below is just a sample of what you can do whether independently with village guides or through an arranged tour (see contact information below):

- Konglor Cave:

A spectacular 7.5 km tunnel through the mountains carved out by the Nam Hin Poun River is the most popular attraction in the park. Stay overnight in local villages (Ban Konglor and Ban Natan) or

Kayaking the river Hin Poun



Explore river caves

in the upscale Sala Hinboun lodge and take a guided boat trip through Konglor Cave and to the many other caves in the area. This is a two-day return trip from Thakek or Vientiane.

- Tad Nam Sanam Waterfall:

This beautiful waterfall can be easily accessed from Ban Khoun Kham, a village many people stay in overnight en route to the Konglor Cave. A 1.5 km walk from the village takes you through pristine forest to the waterfall. Keep your eye out for the numerous macaques in the forest and for signs of wild elephant. There are guesthouses in the village.

- Tiger Spirit Cave (Tham Phi Seu):

A sacred cave with an impressive 40m high arch that is believed to be inhabited by spirits. The trail to the cave departs from Ban Phoneton village winding for 2.5 km up a valley across rice fields and through scenic forest. Keep an eye out for the endangered Francois langur, macaques, serow and the newly discovered Laotian rock rat or kha nyou which inhabits the surrounding limestone rock faces.

- Buddha Cave (Tham Pa Fa):

A recently discovered cave famous for its hidden treasure of hundreds of Buddha statues and ancient manuscripts.

Impressive limestone formations add to the beauty and mystery of the cave which is located near Na Khang Xang village not far from Thakek town.

- Phou Hin Poun Trek:

A popular two-day trek with the Khammouane Eco Guides service (based in Thakek) which combines the culture of the local people with the best of the park's scenery and natural attractions.



Phou Hin Poun karst landscape



Buddha images in Pha Fa cave

- Nam Hinboun River Expedition:

Kayak with Green Discovery for four days through spectacular limestone mountains and old growth forests staying in local villages along the way. This is a trip for the more adventurous who wish to get off the beaten track.

How it helps: Most of the attractions and ecotours inside and around the protected area involve local villages. Rural people therefore benefit directly by providing you with accommodation, food and a variety of services, while some villages also charge fixed entrance fees to help them cover the costs for the protection of caves and cultural sites in their care.

Protected area entry fees are collected to help with the management of the park. By visiting Phou Hin Poun and its surrounding natural attractions you are supporting the local ecotourism industry and providing a strong incentive for the people and government of Khammouane province to protect this unique area.

Phoukham cave



If you wish to optimize your contribution to the local economy then arrange a tour through the home-grown Khammouane Eco Guides Service in Thakek town.

They employ local guides and offer tours into the park which focus on involving and benefiting local communities.

Similarly employing the services of the Konglor Village Guides Association (based in Konglor village) when visiting Konglor Cave will directly benefit both Natan and Konglor villages.

Contact and booking information

Guided tours to the various attractions inside and around the park can be arranged through the Khammouane Eco Guides Service and a number of local travel companies based in Thakek town - the gateway to Phou Hin Poun National Protected Area. Contact Green Discovery for more adventurous trekking, kayaking or mountain biking tours into the park. See this guide for details of the trip offered by North by North East Travel into the protected area.

Khammouane Eco Guides Service is based in the Visitor Information Centre (Tourism Office) in Thakek town. Tel: (+856) [0] 51 212512). Green Discovery has a branch office in Thakek near the river and in most major centres in Laos.


See also www.green discovery laos.com for information on the adventure tours they offer in Phou Hin Poun and www.salalao.com if you wish to learn more about Sala Hinboun Lodge. The Konglor Village Guides Association can be contacted in Konglor village. Ask your hotel or guesthouse for directions in getting there.

For an overview of the cave sites you can visit and trekking opportunities available in Khammouane province see: <http://www.ecotourism laos.com/khammouane.htm>.

Nothing Plain About the Jars

 Activity: Plain of Jars.

 Location: Various places in Xieng Khouang province.

 Tip: Stick to paths that have been cleared of unexploded ordnance.



Plain's boys on a buffalo

A lost Iron Age civilisation left behind hundreds of giant stone urns scattered across the countryside.

The experience: It is an extraordinary sight -- hundreds of giant, stone vessels lying scattered over the grassy plains of Xieng Khouang as if flung across the landscape by an unseen and unearthly hand. The site is known as the 'Plain of Jars', an archaeological wonderland that is soon to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After extensive studies, the evidence suggests the stone jars were built as funerary urns by the Iron Age residents of Xieng Khouang to hold the remains of their dead -- the legacy of a highly ritualized and spiritual culture that flourished 2,000 years ago.

A visit to the three main Plain of Jars sites can be organized through any of the tour companies in Phonsavanh town. The Tourism Office also offers a quality, two-day, overnight trek to a spectacular jar site high in the mountains with local guides. The office, with UNESCO, is developing a range of community-based treks to jar sites and other natural and cultural attractions in the province, due for operation by the end of 2007. Xieng Khouang is a beautiful province of forested, limestone mountains, green valleys and rolling grasslands. Apart from the plain of jars there are many more historical sites, vibrant ethnic villages, handicraft markets, waterfalls, caves and hot springs to visit.

Be sure to drop into the Tourism Information Office in Phonsavanh town to get a map and learn more about the jar sites and to get up-to-date information on the other numerous attractions and tours on offer in Xieng Khouang.

How it helps: The local government of Xieng Khouang is currently receiving a lot of assistance from UNESCO and the New Zealand government to develop the tourism potential of the jar sites and other attractions in the province in a sustainable and responsible way. The goal is to develop locally managed tourism products central around the Plain of Jars that involve and benefit local people and which will help the government with much needed revenue to protect the jar sites and other historical and natural attractions in the province.

When you visit the Tourism Information Office in Phonsavanh and participate in their tours and treks you will be helping the local government to achieve its vision for sustainable tourism development that will protect both the unique cultural heritage of Xieng Khouang while providing a better life for rural communities.

What do you think the jars were used for ?



Location and contact information

There are regular flights and daily bus services to Xieng Khouang from Vientiane and Luang Prabang and an additional bus service from Houaphanh province. Travellers from Vietnam can enter at the Nam Khah - Vinh border crossing (0600-1800 daily).

The Tourism Information Office is located in the centre of Phonsavanh town near the agricultural market and bus station, or it can be contacted by tel: (+856) [0] 61 312217.


There are also several travel agencies in town which can provide information and organize transport and tours to the jars sites and other attractions in the province.

See <http://www.ecotourismlaos.com/xiengkhouang.htm> for further information on the attractions of Xieng Khouang.

Among the Forest Hunters

 Activity: Trekking in Xe Pian National Protected Area.

 Location: Southern Champasak province.

 Tip: It's forbidden to try the Ta Ong trail without a trained guide.

Learn about the forest from Brau hunters who now guide visitors in this remote refuge.

The experience: This two or three-day trekking adventure takes you into the remote forests of the Xe Pian National Protected Area considered to be the second most important protected area for conservation in Laos. Village guides will teach you about the many medicinal plants and forest products their communities depend on and point out the abundant signs of wildlife along the trail. Your destination is Ban Ta Ong, an ethnic Brau village deep in the park where you will overnight in a traditional community lodge or, if you prefer, with a family in the village. Brau hunters from the village will guide you further into the protected area at dawn to look for wildlife and listen to the sounds of the waking forest. Squirrels and birdlife abound and you may be lucky enough catch a glimpse of the endangered, yellow-cheeked crested gibbon or hear its morning song resonating through the forest. In the late morning you will walk to Ban Nong Ping, have a Lao lunch and then finish your journey by wooden canoe down the Ta Euang River through bamboo forests alive with colourful birds and occasional troops of monkeys.

Ta Ong Trail view point



Along the Euang river

For the more adventurous it is possible to arrange overnight treks with Ta Ong village guides deeper into undisturbed forest where you will have a better chance of encountering wildlife and a unique opportunity to experience the life of a Brau hunter.

How it helps: On this trek three different villages in the protected area benefit directly from providing guides, food, boat transport and accommodation. Each village has adopted systems for sharing benefits within their community and for allocating a percentage of income earned to a village development fund. Trekking groups are kept small to ensure that visitors enjoy their experience and that villages are not overwhelmed by an influx of foreigners. Each visitor is also required to pay an entry fee which supports the management of the Xe Pian National Protected Area.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is currently developing community based ecotourism in Xe Pian as a strategy for conservation. Your participation in this trek will help by providing the Ta Ong villagers with an added incentive to protect their forests and wildlife.

Contact and booking information

The trek can be arranged through the Champasak Eco Guides Service at the Tourism Office in Pakse (tel: +856 [0] 31 212021); the Tourism Office in Champasak district town, or through Green Discovery tel: (+856) [0] 31 252908, www.greendiscovery.com) and other tour companies in Pakse.

Kingfisher Lodge (see this guide for details) located 48 km south of Pakse on the edge of the protected area can also arrange the trek for you.

For further information about the trek, the people of Ban Ta Ong and what to bring, visit: <http://www.ecotourismlaos.com/activities/taong.htm>.

Laotian Culture on Show

 Activity: The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre.

 Location: Foot of Phousi Hill, Luang Prabang town.

 Tip: Closed Mondays.

This is a quick way to learn about the diversity and depth of Laotian ethnography and traditional culture.

The experience: The Traditional Arts & Ethnology Centre has arisen out of the passion and commitment of three women to showcase and conserve the rich and diverse cultures of Laos' ethnic minority groups. Located in an historic building in Luang Prabang, the centre features exhibits of the cultural artefacts, traditional clothing, household implements and handicrafts of the different ethnic groups from the region. Guided tours are available, or visitors can wander around the displays in their own time learning about the lifestyles, beliefs and traditions of the different ethnic groups from detailed interpretation provided in both Lao and English languages.

The centre has a shop that sells books, photographic art work and exclusive handicrafts produced by the ethnic groups featured in the exhibits.



Lanten wooden sculpture

At any time during your cultural exploration you can take a break and relax in the Patio Café overlooking the beautiful That Chomsi temple. For enthusiasts it is possible to attend seminars with resident anthropological experts who can provide deeper insights into the fascinating cultures and way of life of Laos' ethnic groups.

How it helps: The centre is a privately run, not-for-profit institution dedicated to the promotion and conservation of Laos' ethnic cultural diversity. An important part of its mission is to give Lao people the opportunity to learn about and appreciate their own cultural heritage. To encourage local people to visit, the centre offers free admission to Lao citizens and arranges special visits from schools, government offices, tourism businesses and guides, local villages and handicraft artisans. The centre is also providing an important outlet for local artisans to sell their handicraft products at fair prices helping them to sustain their craft and family businesses.

Visit the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre and help to support this important initiative to conserve Lao culture.

Location and contact information

The centre is open 0900-1800, Tuesday to Sunday (closed Mondays). It is located behind the Dala market at the foot of Phousi hill in Luang Prabang town. Ask your guesthouse or hotel for directions.

For more information contact

Directors, Ms Tara Gujadhur and Ms Thongkhoun Southvilay. Tel/Fax: (+856) [0] 71 253 364
E-mail: information@taeclaos.org
Web: www.taeclaos.org.

Home to Twenty Ethnic Groups

 Activity: Adventure trips and cultural discovery in Luang Namtha.

 Location: Various locations in Luang Namtha province.

 Tip: When in Akha villages, don't touch the village's wooden spirit gate or the ceremonial swing.



A simple hospitality

Gentle day trips or strenuous hiking and rafting are available in an area known for its ethnic diversity.

The experience: With its incredible diversity of ethnic groups, forested mountain ranges and wild, scenic rivers, Luang Namtha is becoming one of Southeast Asia's most popular ecotourism destinations. The province offers a wealth of opportunities for travellers who have a desire for adventure and authentic cultural discovery in small groups and with low impact. Many of the trekking, mountain biking, kayaking and rafting activities will take you into the Nam Ha National Protected Area where you will be accompanied by local guides and stay overnight in the villages or in the forest.

There are over 20 different ethnic peoples in the province making it one of the most culturally diverse regions in the country. The tours available range from gentle day walks or bike trips through the villages and rice fields of Luang Namtha valley to four-day trekking and rafting adventures. The following is just a sample of what you can do:

Homestead in the hills



- Ban Nalan Trek:

A two-day easy to moderate walk that follows the Nam Ha River and then climbs through dense forests across a high ridge with spectacular views. Overnight in a riverside community lodge belonging to the Khmu village of Ban Nalan. Operated by the Luang Namtha Eco Guides Service.

- Nammat Trek:

A three-day moderately difficult trek with Khmu and Akha guides into the heart of the Nam Ha Protected Area. Spend the first night in a bamboo forest camp built by the villagers and trek the next day to the Akha village of Ban Nammat Mai where you will stay in their traditionally constructed lodge. Trek down into the Luang Namtha valley on the third day taking time to visit the local market on the way. Operated by the Luang Namtha Eco Guides Service and Green Discovery.

- Nam Ha Experience:

A two-day kayaking adventure down the Nam Ha River inside the protected area. Spend the first night in the Lanten ethnic village of Ban Nam Goy and on the second day enjoy exciting class-two and class-three rapids beneath towering trees and the watchful eyes of the resident monkeys. Operated by Green Discovery.

- Akha Trail:

A challenging three-day trek in Vieng Phoukha district with Khmu and Akha guides. Home of one of the last populations of black cheeked, crested gibbons. Overnight in the Akha mountain top village of Ban Nam Lo and the next day trek deeper into the protected area to spend the night in the Akha village of Ban Thong Lat. On day three, walk down the mountain visiting the bat inhabited Prasat Cave. Operated by Vieng Phoukha Eco Guides Service and Green Discovery.



- Namtha Valley Biking Tour:

A gentle day's bike ride around the picturesque Luang Namtha valley. Ride among rice fields and down tree-lined country roads visiting Black Tai, Tai Leu and Lanten ethnic villages along the way. Have lunch in a Leu village and see silk production, weaving and the making of Lao rice whisky. Operated by Green Discovery.

- Nam Ha - Namtha River Adventure:

A three-day kayaking and one-day boating expedition that takes you into the rural heart of Southeast Asia, beginning in the forests of the Nam Ha Protected Area and finishing at the Mekong River on the Thai border. Stay in remote Lanten, Khmu and Leu villages and see a way of life that has barely changed in the last 100 years. Operated by Green Discovery.

How it helps: Luang Namtha province is a showcase for genuine ecotourism in Southeast Asia. With the assistance of numerous supporting projects and companies such as Green Discovery,



all of the tours operated are designed to ensure local communities and service providers are involved and benefit as much as possible.

Studies have shown that for a typical two- to three-day trek approximately 30% of your total payment for the tour stays with the villages and 25% goes to drivers and guides from the towns. The use of trained guides, policies for minimizing waste and carrying out rubbish, and limits on group size all help to minimize environmental and cultural impacts. The locally run Eco Guides Services provide pre-departure orientations to their guests on safety, what to expect and how to behave in a culturally sensitive way when they visit villages. Additionally, all visitors to the Nam Ha Protected Area are required to purchase an entry permit which goes toward the management of the park.

Contact and booking information

Luang Namtha town can be reached easily from northern Thailand (via the Ban Houay Xay border crossing), from Boten on the Chinese border and from Luang Prabang further south. There is also a regular air service from Vientiane.


To make bookings and get information on what tours are offered in the province by the Eco Guides Services visit the Visitor Information Centre in central Luang Namtha town (tel: +856 [0] 86 312047) or the tourism offices in Vieng Phoukha district (tel: +856 [0] 20 2393534) and Muang Sing district (tel: +856 [0] 20 2393534) which both have their local guide services and treks.


Green Discovery tours can be booked through their Vientiane office or visit their office in Luang Namtha town on the main street; tel: +856 [0] 86 211484; e-mail: namtha@greendiscoverylaos.com; postal address: P O Box 28, Luang Namtha, Lao 0300.

For further information on the full range of ecotours and treks offered out of Luang Namtha town and the districts of Vieng Phoukha and Muang Sing see: www.greendiscoverylaos.com and www.ecotourismlaos.com/Luangnamtha.

See also the Luang Namtha Travel Website at www.luangnamtha.com for comprehensive information on ecotourism and the different ethnic groups which live in the province.

As Remote as It Gets

 Activity: Trekking, camping and river rides in Phongsaly province.

 Location: Various protected areas in Phongsaly.

 Tip: The best way to see the Phou Din Den NPA is to hire a boat north from Hat Sa.



Rugged Phongsaly wilderness

Phongsaly offers remote deep forest treks, hilltribe diversity, and the discovery of former French outposts. Rivers remain the main arteries of transport.

The experience: Phongsaly is about as remote and timeless as one can get in Laos. Located in the far north, at the crossroads between Chinese and Southeast Asian culture, it is one of the least populated and most densely forested provinces in the country. It is just beginning to open its doors to the outside world. Here you will get a warm welcome from the local people and the rare chance to trek trails where few have gone before you. With its dramatic mountain scenery, intact forests, rich birdlife and 28 different ethnic groups, Phongsaly is set to become a major ecotourism destination in Laos.

The Tourism Office can arrange a variety of two- to five-day treks with English speaking guides to the forests and ethnic villages of the province's protected areas.

Hillside temple drums



A three-day trek in Boun Tai district takes you into the dense forests of the Nam Lan Conservation Area where you will stay in a Tai Yang village in the river valley and, on the second night, with the Akha people high in the mountains. Along the way you will also visit an attractive 19th century Tai Lue temple, the remains of a colonial French outpost and hot springs. The forests abound with birdlife.

Longer and more adventurous journeys take you by boat up the Nam Ou River into the remote Phou Din Den National Protected Area where you can camp, trek and stay with local people. And for those with the time, consider returning to Luang Prabang by small boat down the beautiful Nam Ou River as the perfect way to complete your visit to Phongsaly.

How it helps: The Provincial Tourism Office has had support and training to establish an English speaking guide service and trekking programme which is founded on the principles of ecotourism. Local communities are involved in all the treks and earn income directly through providing lodging, food, transport and guiding services. A percentage of the income generated is used to establish village development funds to ensure the spread of benefits in the community. Ecotourism development is also providing local people with the opportunity to sell their textiles and handicrafts in their villages and through cooperative outlets established in the local towns.




Location and booking information

It is possible to either travel overland by bus through the mountains from Luang Prabang or Oudomxay provincial towns to Phongsaly town or fly directly from Vientiane.

For information and to arrange a trek, visit the Tourism Office in Phongsaly town (tel: +856 [0] 20 5688211) or, for the Nam Lan Conservation Area trek, you can also go directly to the Tourism Office in Boun Tai district (tel: +856 [0] 88 210861). Advance bookings are not necessary.

Also visit www.ecotourismlaos.com/phongsaly for further information on the trekking programme and attractions of Phongsaly province.

Do It Organically

-  Activity: Vang Vieng Organic Farm, Guesthouse & Restaurant.
-  Location: Vang Vieng town, Vientiane province.
-  Tip: Be sure to try the mulberry shakes. They're delicious!



Taste the difference in the restaurant

Experience an organic farm that is making a stand against poor agricultural practices.

The experience: The Vang Vieng Farm is found in the picturesque Nam Song valley beneath towering limestone mountains just a short drive from the bustling tourism town of Vang Vieng. Stop in for the day to see the farm and sample the delicious organic produce served in the restaurant or stay for a week in the guesthouse and learn the art of organic farming. There are no schedules or itineraries to follow here. You can help out on the farm as you wish, play with the children from the local village, go for walks in the countryside and spend an hour or two teaching English to the local villagers in their community centre.

The farm specializes in the cultivation of organic fruits, vegetables and mulberry, which is used for making tea and feeding the silk worms that are raised on the farm to support the local silk weaving industry. Here you can observe the full process of silk production from the raising of the worms to

dyeing and weaving. The Hmong, Khmu and Lao women from the local villages produce and sell some of the finest silk scarves to be found in the country. The congenial Lao owner, Thanongsi Soangkoun (Mr 'T'), has a passion for organic farming and helping out the local people. He welcomes all visitors who wish to volunteer their time and skills working on the farm or teaching English to local children. He also welcomes any traveller who simply wishes to relax and enjoy rural life and the wonderful food that the farm has to offer.

How it helps: Deeply concerned about the degradation of the land and soil in Vang Vieng through poor agricultural practices, Mr T established the Vang Vieng organic farm to demonstrate to local farmers that it is possible to manage land in a way that is both profitable and healthy without destroying it. He teaches local farmers about organic methods and has been instrumental in helping local women to establish a silk farming and weaving industry. Presently, the farm employs some 20 women to weave scarves for sale to visitors. The farm has also constructed a community centre and library for the local village, purchased a school bus and, with the assistance of foreign visitors, provides after-school English language lessons to the children of the area.

This community farm cares



Location and booking information


From Vang Vieng town hire a song tao truck or tuk-tuk for the 3 km drive north to the village of Phou Dindaeng and the mulberry farm (also known as Vang Vieng Organic Farm). Watch out for the sign on the right side of the road. The farm is at the end of a short gravel road west (left) of Highway 13 along the banks of the Nam Song River. Ask your guesthouse / hotel for directions.

To make a booking for the restaurant / guesthouse or enquiries about what is offered at the farm contact:
Mr Thanongsi Solangkoun, PO Box 253, Vang Vieng, Lao PDR.
Tel: (+856) [0] 20 5909132 or (home) (+856) [0] 23 511220.
E-mail: suanmone@hotmail.com.
For further information also see: www.laofarm.org.

Inside the War ‘Cave City’

 Activity: The Viengxay Kaysone Phomvihane Cave Memorial.

 Location: Viengxay district, Houaphanh province.

 Tip: Bring a good torch if exploring the hospital cave or other remote ones.



War leader's dining table

Explore caves where thousands of Pathet Lao defied military bombardment for almost a decade. Many of the caves are well preserved and are full of exhibits that bring to life a painful period in modern history.

The experience: Deep in the forest and limestone mountains of Viengxay in Houaphanh province lies an historic ‘hidden city’ little known to the outside world. This remarkable site comprises a vast network of caves that became the refuge and home for the leaders and fighters of the revolutionary Pathet Lao as they fought for their country against the American backed royalist regime from 1964-1973. Today it is regarded by the Laotian people to be the birthplace and spiritual home of the Lao PDR. Over 20,000 people lived in more than 400 caves, creating an underground city complete with a hospital, school, shops, government offices, a bakery and even a theatre. After nine long years of enduring daily bombardments from American war planes, the leaders of the Pathet Lao finally emerged victorious from their underground refuge and eventually moved to Vientiane to establish the Lao PDR in 1975.

Now a peaceful landscape

This unique site is now open to visitors who can tour the cave network with English speaking guides and learn of this dramatic episode in Lao history.

How it helps: The ‘hidden city’ of Viengxay is the centrepiece of an inspired project undertaken by the government with outside assistance ‘to make poverty history’ in this remote region through sensitive tourism development. There are plans to improve road access to the province, beautify and develop the town of Viengxay and ‘open up’ other natural and cultural attractions in the province.

By visiting the caves you will be helping the government to conserve this historic site and to realize its vision for improving the lives of the people of Houaphanh through responsible tourism founded on the unique history, culture and natural beauty of the province.

Location and contact information

Houaphanh can be reached by public bus from both Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang or, if coming from Vietnam, take a taxi from the border town of Na Meo (Vietnamese side) which is only 55 km from Viengxay. Visitors to the ‘hidden city’ can consider travelling the Northern Heritage Route which links the World Heritage site of Luang Prabang to Houaphanh, the menhir standing stones, south of Viengxay and the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang.

Tours can also be arranged to the caves in Viengxay and to other attractions in the region by most travel companies in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

The cave visitor centre is open every day 0800-1200 and 1330-1630. Tel: (+856) [0] 64 314321.

For further information on the caves, other attractions in the province and suggested travel itineraries for the ‘Northern Heritage Route’ see: www.ecotourismlaos.com or visit the Houaphanh provincial Tourism Office in Sam Neua. Tel: (+856) [0] 64 312567 or 314212.



Salt Lick City

 Activity: Elephant watching from an observation tower.

 Location: Phou Khao Khouay National Protected Area.

 Tip: With so many wild elephants around, only visit with a trained guide.

Relatively near to Vientiane, see wild elephants gather at a salt lick from the safety of an observation tower. Simple or strenuous guided forest walks are also available.

The experience: In the mid 1990s a herd of some 30 wild elephants living in the mountains of Phou Khao Khouay National Protected Area (“Buffalo Horn Mountain”) decided to move down to the lowlands and adopt the small village of Ban Na as part of their home. (It is likely they initially came down to eat the sweet sugar cane newly planted by the villagers.) The elephants discovered that the natural abundance of wild foods and crops in the area was a good reason to stay.

Within 4 km of Ban Na village the elephants found another much needed resource, a natural salt lick and dry season water source. The area soon became a regular feature on the elephants’ itinerary. This small, muddy stream bed in the forest has now become the site of the first elephant observation tower in Laos. It is possibly the only safe place to see these magnificent endangered animals in their wild state. The site is within just a day’s travel of Vientiane City.

Elephants come to the salt lick all year



Elephant observation tower

Visitors trek for up to two hours with trained village guides from Ban Na village to the large, elephant observation tower (complete with a toilet facility, sleeping area and solar power) where they spend the night overlooking the salt lick.

The elephants usually appear in the early evening and into the night. They frolic in the pools and eat salt. They are most easily seen under the full moon and during the dry season when water is scarce, although they do visit the salt lick throughout the year.

Visitors have reported seeing up to 25 elephants at one time, occasionally with babies in their midst, an encouraging sign that the population is still breeding.

The villagers of Ban Na also offer homestays in their village, exquisite woven baskets for sale and day or overnight camping treks through the forest to waterfalls, caves and viewpoints in the park.

Ban Hatkhai, a 200 year-old village also located at the edge of the Phou Khao Khouay Protected Area, offers visitors a variety of guided day walks and overnight treks combined with river travel into the mountains, forests and waterfalls of the park. There are both gentle day walks to the beautiful Tad Xay and Pha Xay waterfalls and pools nearer to the village as well as more demanding overnight treks.

The strenuous treks ascend to a high plateau at the top of the Pha Luang cliff from where there are stunning views over the forest to the Mekong valley below. Birdlife and wild orchids abound and you may well see a variety of snakes and signs of large animals.



View over Phou Khao Khouay NPA

How it helps: Both Ban Na and Ban Hatkhai villagers own, operate and manage their own tourism enterprises for the benefit of their own communities. An encouraging sign is that in the last two years, since the withdrawal of project support by the German Development Service (DED), the villagers have demonstrated their ability to sustain the initiatives by themselves. Both villages earn income through providing guiding services, accommodation, boat transport, food and handicrafts for sale and have established village revolving funds from tourism revenue. The revolving funds are managed by committees and provide low interest loans to community members who need assistance to pay school fees, send their children to hospital in emergencies, or develop their farms.

Each visitor is required to pay a national park entry fee. An additional fee is collected from visitors to contribute to an elephant conservation fund that compensates farmers who suffer elephant damage to their crops. The fund also helps maintain the elephant tower and pays a monthly wage to an extraordinary man. He is Mr Bounthorn, a former elephant hunter who now manages the conservation-cum-tourism initiative in Ban Na. He is now an ardent advocate of elephant conservation.

As a result of the elephant conservation and tourism project, Ban Na village has developed a number of community rules for conserving the forests, trekking sites and elephant habitat in the area.

Location and booking information:

Both villages are located within two hours' drive south from Vientiane city via Route 13. For directions on how to get there, plus further information about the project and tours available, see www.trekkingcentrallaos.com or visit the Tourism Information Centre at the National Tourism Authority on Lane Xang Avenue in Vientiane.

Tours to the Ban Na Elephant Tower or Ban Hatkhai can be arranged through a number of operators in Vientiane, such as Green Discovery, Exotissimo, Lao Youth Travel, Diethelm, or Khaen Travel.

For independent travellers interested in an overnight tour to either village, it is recommended you contact the villages in advance to arrange guides and, in the case of Ban Na, to ensure the elephant tower is available. Contact the following numbers, but be aware the villagers speak little English. You may need translation assistance: Ban Na: tel: (+856) [0] 20 2208286 / 020 2208262; Ban Hatkhai: tel: 020 2240303.

View from the Ban Na Elephant Tower



Wild elephant

Spinning Island Yarns

 Activity: Don Kho weaving island and Phou Khong mountain.

 Location: Northern Champasak province.

 Tip: The trek to Phou Khong is a five-hour hike. Bring sturdy shoes and bathing gear.



Peaceful end to the day

A small island with a historic past in the Mekong river offers insights into cotton, silk and basket weaving. A nearby mountain beckons with the promise of panoramic views and wild orchids. Simple homestays are the main form of accommodation.

The experience: Don Kho is a small island on the Mekong River that was once the original capital of Champasak province during the French colonial period. Today it is a tranquil island famous for its silk and cotton weaving artisans. Visitors can make a day trip from Pakse or arrange an overnight stay with a local family or in a community run guesthouse which includes your Lao meals and the option for a guided walk around the island's attractions with your hosts. The island, which has about 450 residents, offers a wonderful opportunity to observe master weavers at work in a rural environment. They are happy to provide lessons in weaving to those who are interested.

Don Kho weaving lady



Or if you are not a weaving enthusiast, enjoy the sandy beaches around the island and wandering through the villages immersing yourself in the daily life of rural Lao people.

Consider purchasing examples of the high quality, traditional textiles on offer knowing that the benefits go directly to the artisans' families.

A trip to Don Kho Island can be readily combined with a trek to nearby Phou Khong Mountain which lies inside the Phou Xieng Thong National Protected Area, near the border of Thailand. The area is known for its sweeping views, abundance of wild orchids, volcanic rock formations and ancient Khmer ruins. The mountain area is also famous for a cave hermitage inhabited by Buddhist nuns who you may be able to visit.

From Don Kho Island visitors can take a boat up the Mekong River to the small and friendly village of Ban Mai Singsamphan. The village is inside the protected area. Visitors can spend the night with a local family and feast on freshly caught fish.

The village is perched by the river and is famous in southern Laos for its beautifully made fish baskets. Waking early the next day village guides will accompany you on a day trek to the mountain interpreting the folklore of the rock formations and the historical and natural attractions along the way.

Three days are required to visit both Don Kho Island and Khong mountain from Pakse. Or you can visit the destinations separately taking a day or overnight trip to Don Kho or a two-day trip to Khong mountain directly from Pakse (see booking information below).



Wild Orchids

How it helps: The people from Don Kho Island and Ban Mai Singsamphan have received support from the Mekong Tourism Development Project (MTDP) to develop and manage their own tourism initiatives. Homestay families, boat drivers and local guides have organized themselves into cooperatives in order to share the benefits from tourism.

Most of the goods, accommodation, transport and guiding services are provided by local people, so the revenue remains largely in the local economy.

To promote the distribution of benefits, a small percentage of the tourism revenue is taxed and allocated to a village development fund on both Don Kho Island and in Ban Mai Singsamphan. Your participation in this ecotourism programme helps to conserve the traditional art of silk, cotton and basket weaving in the region. It also provides an economic incentive for the villagers of Ban Mai Singsamphan to conserve the wild orchids in the Phou Xieng Thong protected area.

Don Kho dwelling



With the additional help of protected area entrance fees charged to each visitor, the village has established its own orchid conservation area and nursery, the first in Laos.

Visitors who book their tours through the Eco Guide Service in Pakse will also help to support and build the capacity of locally recruited and trained guides and that of the Provincial Tourism Office, the government agency responsible for sustainable tourism development in the region.

Location and contact information:

Bookings for guided tours to both Don Kho Weaving Island and / or Khong Mountain can be made through the Champasak EcoGuide Service (tel: +856 [0] 31 212021) located in the Tourism Office next to Lao Aviation in Pakse or with Green Discovery (tel: +856 [0] 31 252908, www.green.discovery.laos.com) or Lane Xang Travel in Pakse.

Alternatively, independent travellers can take a bus/pick up or tuk tuk to Ban Saphai village on the banks of the Mekong River, some 16 km north of Pakse, from where they can receive information and make all travel arrangements to both destinations at the District Tourism Office located in the handicraft market.


Independent travellers wanting only to visit Phou Khong mountain can take a public bus or tuk tuk from Pakse to Ban Boungkha village, some 34 km north of Pakse, from where you can hire a boat to Ban Mai Singsamphan and organize a homestay and village guides yourself. However, as village guides speak only a little English it may be more satisfying to arrange your tour in Pakse as described above which will also include an English speaking local guide.

For further information on the silk weaving on Don Kho Island see:
www.ecotourism.laos.com/activities/handicrafts/silk_weaving.htm.
For Phou Khong mountain see:
<http://www.ecotourism.laos.com/activities/khongmountain.htm>.

Freewheeling Friends

 Activity: Samlaan Cycling Tours.

 Location: Oudomxay, northern Laos.

 Tip: The best season for cycling in Laos is mid-October to mid-February.

Low-impact cycling tours in northern Laos provide cultural insights. The operator uses some of the income to build schools and provide clean water to villages.

The experience: Born and raised in Laos, Ken Phetxayphone has always loved to ride bikes. His small, friendly team from Oudomxay will take you by mountain bikes through the back roads, forests and villages of northern Laos on tours ranging from half a day to 15 days. He caters for all levels of fitness and biking experience and can provide a support vehicle for groups of mixed abilities allowing you the freedom to cycle for as long as you like in a day. Many of the tours combine biking with boat trips along scenic rivers and short treks to natural attractions along the way. You will stay overnight in the villages of the many ethnic groups in northern Laos and have the chance to experience their way of life and culture. Ken is very flexible and will help travellers to design their own tours according to their special interests or desire for adventure.

He offers multiple-country tours into the 'golden triangle' spanning Laos, northern Thailand and southern China. Whether you turn up by yourself, as a couple, or as larger group, he will always be there to welcome you with a smile.

Trips from half a day to 15 days



Ken, on the left, and his staff

How it helps: Samlaan Cycling Tours is a locally owned and managed business bringing income to the small towns and villages throughout northern Laos. Ken only employs local people and has a policy of spreading the benefits from his tours to small, locally-owned restaurants, guesthouses and villages he encounters along the way. In the spirit of ecotourism, the guides are specially trained to minimise the cultural and environmental impacts of their tours. They will teach you about the way of life and behavioural etiquette of the various ethnic groups you will visit. The guides have a strict policy of packing out all rubbish and reducing plastic waste.

Out of a keen desire to help disadvantaged rural Lao children, Ken established a charity in 2004 to raise money from cyclists to Laos to build schools and provide clean water to villages in the north. So far it has funded the construction of three schools and the provision of clean water to one village, with plans for more. Any donations you make will go directly to helping some of the many children that you will meet along the way during your cycling adventure with Ken and his team in Oudomxay.

Visitor comment: Ken was an excellent ambassador for the country. He was extremely knowledgeable, helpful, friendly, and spoke perfect English, as well as all the Lao dialects (David Mocatta, UK)

Location and booking information

The Samlaan Cycling Tours office is located opposite the first petrol station encountered about 1 km from the bus station heading into Oudomxay town in Ban Cheang village. Oudomxay is within a day's bus / taxi ride of both Luang Namtha (to the north) and Luang Prabang (to the south) and can be easily reached overland from northern Thailand and southern China. There are also three flights a week to Oudomxay from Vientiane.

Bookings can be made by contacting Ken (Houmphanh Phetxayphone) at his office on tel: (+856) [0] 30 513 0184 or on his mobile phone: (+856) [0] 20 5609790, or by e mail: info@samlaancycling.com or kenphet@yahoo.com.

For further information see: www.samlaancycling.com




A Guide to Responsible Tourism

Caring for Elephants

 Activity: Tiger Trail Outdoor Adventures.

 Location: Luang Prabang province.

 Tip: Choose an activity that reflects your interest level and standard of fitness.



Interactions in small groups

Trek, bike or kayak in the hills of Luang Prabang, help the Hmong in the fields, or care for ageing elephants too old to work.

The experience. Fair Trek is a specialist brand of ecotourism developed by Tiger Trail Outdoor Adventures that is committed to putting something back into the communities and environment that it visits. A wide range of tours are offered which combine trekking with kayaking, mountain biking or elephant riding in the mountainous hinterland of Luang Prabang, together with visits to the indigenous communities participating in the Fair Trek programme.

Trek-based tours accommodate different levels of fitness and interests. All aim to provide the visitor with an opportunity to interact with local people in small groups and experience authentic rural life in Laos.

Care for old elephants



The "Hmong Village Experience", for example, is a three-day trekking and cultural tour offering visitors an opportunity to live with a Hmong community and to share in the daily lives of the people. Visitors can help in the fields, tend livestock, go fishing with the men, or assist the women with weaving handicrafts for the local market.

Another three day adventure tour offers visitors a combination of elephant riding, mountain biking, kayaking and overnight stays in a Khmu village and lodge. A total of 11 Fair Trek tours are offered by Tiger Trail ranging from one to three days. All treks are accompanied by trained Lao and community guides and offer local style lodging and traditional food when visiting villages.

Near the Fair Trek project area is the Elephant Park & Lodge, another Tiger Trail project which aims to use the benefits of tourism to assist in the conservation of the Asian elephant. The Elephant Park provides a much needed home for retired, working elephants, while giving visitors an opportunity to become closely acquainted with these magnificent animals.

The project has a number of adult elephants and young ones cared for by local village mahouts (traditional elephant keepers) who can also introduce you to the art of handling elephants.

Visitors are able to ride to a scenic waterfall with the elephants, bathe with them in the river and feed them. After several hours of close contact with your elephant, you will be sure to leave with a great affection for this highly intelligent animal.



Into the countryside by foot, kayak, bicycle or elephant

It is also possible to visit on a day trip from nearby Luang Prabang, combine your visit with a Fair Trek or, after a day's outing with the elephants, stay overnight in the park at the luxury Elephant Lodge on the banks of the Nam Khan River.

How it helps: Through the Fair Trek ecotourism programme Tiger Trail has a mission to improve the welfare and environment of the communities it works with. The tours contribute an average 30% of the revenue generated directly to the villages through the sale of food, guesthouse accommodation and employment. Funds have also been created to provide development assistance to local communities and for reforesting the project area. Tiger Trail limits visitor numbers on its Fair Treks to minimise impacts on host communities. It also works closely with SNV (the Netherlands Development Agency) and the local government to monitor the impacts of tourism on the environment and welfare of the member communities, an unusual and commendable initiative for a privately-run tourism enterprise.

Elephant ride



The goal of the Elephant Park Project is to provide a refuge for those elephants that have been retired from the logging industry and which face an uncertain future.

Experienced mahouts and vets care for the elephants in a natural environment and ensure they remain in good health and receive nutritious food. The project employs many of its staff from surrounding communities and provides funds generated by tour revenues to deliver water supplies and help schools in nearby communities.

Future plans include the opening of a training centre for young elephants and a facility for converting dung to biogas, fertilizer and paper. The project also has a sponsorship plan for visitors who wish to help with the expenses of feeding and caring for the elephants.




Location and booking information

The office for Tiger Trail Outdoor Adventures is located at the intersection of Sisavangvong Road and Chao Fa Ngum Road in Luang Prabang. To make bookings for Fair Treks or the Elephant Park & Lodge, telephone the office (+856) [0] 71 252655, or e mail info@trekking-in-laos.com for Fair Treks and info@laos-adventures.com for the Elephant Park & Lodge.

Bookings can also be made at any travel agent displaying the 'Fair Trek' logo or offering Tiger Trail Outdoor Adventure tours.

For further information also see: www.laos-adventures.com and www.trekking-in-laos.com

Into the Sacred Forest

-  Activity: Trekking with Savannakhet Eco Guides Service.
-  Location: Various protected areas, Savannakhet province.
-  Tip: On the five-day journey, a good level of fitness is needed. Bring photos of your family and home. Local villagers will love it.

Take short or long guided treks to revered forests and lakes and to see the remains of Muang Kao historical site. Stay with the Katong people or take the challenging five-day expedition.

The experience: The Savannakhet Eco Guides Service specialises in ecotourism. They offer a variety of trekking tours into the forests and ethnic villages of the protected areas in Savannakhet province. The trips range from one to five days in small groups with trained, English-speaking guides. Visitors can make a day or overnight trip to the beautiful Dong Natad Provincial Protected Area near to Savannakhet town, or choose from a number of more adventurous overnight treks. One of these is into the Dong Phou Vieng and Phou Xang He National Protected Area, where there is a chance to see rare wildlife such as Elds deer, hornbills, silvered langur, and, if you are lucky, the stunning and endangered Douc langur.

Village development funds created



Beside the Xe Banghieng river

In Dong Natad you will walk through old-growth forests and around the sacred Nong Lom Lake with visits also to the famous Buddhist That Ing Hang stupa and remains of the ancient city of Muang Kao. The three-day “Katang Trail to the Sacred Forest” trek takes you into the forests of Dong Phou Vieng National Protected Area with local village guides and, briefly, into the fascinating lives of the Katang people, returning by river on the third day to Savannakhet. For those looking for true adventure the five-day trek into Phou Xang He National Protected Area takes you into steep, forested mountains with spectacular views over central Laos combining camping with homestays in remote ethnic villages. A 4WD journey takes you comfortably back.


How it helps: The Eco Guides Service and ecotourism programme was developed with help from the Netherlands Development Agency (SNV). The goal is to provide employment and income to local people and promote the improved conservation of the protected areas in Savannakhet. Most of the revenue generated stays in the province benefiting the guides, transport providers, markets and communities involved in the programme. Village Development Funds have been created from tourism revenue to ensure the fair distribution of benefits within participating communities while an additional Conservation Trust Fund, also derived from tourism revenue, assists government staff to monitor wildlife and undertake management activities in the protected areas.

Location and booking information

Visit the Savannakhet Eco Guide Service at the Tourism Office on Ratsaphanith Road, Savannakhet (tel/fax: +856 [0] 41 214203). Bookings can also be made by e-mail to: savannakhetguides2@yahoo.com and through the numerous travel agencies / companies in Savannakhet. The longer treks into the National Protected Areas depart just once a week. Call the Eco Guides Service to find out when.

For more information on the treks offered visit: <http://www.ecotourismlaos.com/ecotourismprojects.htm> and click on the protected area site names under “Savannakhet Ecotourism Programme”.

Peaceful Wetland Retreat

-  Activity: Kingfisher Lodge & Kiatngong Elephant Village.
-  Location: 60 kms south of Pakse in Champasak province.
-  Tip: Book a room in the lodge before going there

A family run operator offers mountain biking, bird watching boat trips, organically grown food, elephant riding lessons -- and no television.

The experience: Kingfisher Lodge, a family-run eco-friendly business, can be found nestled between the rice fields of Kiatngong village and the wetlands and forests of the Xe Pian National Protected Area. The traditionally designed bamboo-wooden bungalows provide comfortable, private accommodation overlooking the wetlands and surrounding forests of the protected area. An open plan restaurant serves organic, locally grown Lao food. Visitors may notice the absence of music and television, a deliberate gesture of the family owners to enhance the natural experience for their guests. The lodge can arrange elephant rides to the remains of an ancient, stone temple on the top of nearby Phou Asa mountain, 'jungle safaris' by elephant, mountain biking, bird watching trips into the wetland and forest walks. A recently added activity offers guests the chance to learn how to ride an elephant under the tuition of a local mahout.

Kingfisher Lodge



Riding up Phou Asa

Alternative, cheaper accommodation is offered in the neighbouring village of Ban Kiatngong which owns and operates its own bungalows. The village also offers elephant rides to Phou Asa mountain, guided forest walks and birding trips by boat into the wetland.

How it helps: The Kingfisher Lodge is designed in a traditional style to harmonize with its natural and cultural surroundings and, through the use of waste water treatment plants, solar panels and recycling systems, strives to minimize environmental impacts. Guests entering the protected area will be required to pay entrance fees to contribute toward park management. The lodge is presently monitoring logging and other illegal activities by outsiders in the surrounding forests.

The nearby village of Ban Kiatngong benefits directly through employment and opportunities to provide food, labour, elephant tours, handicrafts for sale and guiding services. Additionally, the lodge is providing English language training for their staff and contributing 5% of the revenue generated by tour activities to help the local school.

Location and booking information

The lodge and village are located 48 km south of Pakse on route 13. At Km 48 at the village of Thang Beng turn left down route 18a for 8 km and at the sign turn right for another 2 km to the village.

To make a booking for the lodge and arrange a pick up from Km 48 or Pakse tel: (+856) [0] 30 5345016 or e-mail info@kingfishercolodge.com. Or write to P.O Box 190, Pakse, Lao PDR. For further information see www.kingfishercolodge.com.

Alternatively, it is possible to take public transport from Pakse directly to Ban Kiatngong village and the lodge, although it is recommended to reserve a room at the lodge in advance. Visitors who want to stay in the Ban Kiatngong bungalows can do so by going directly to the village or by arranging transport and a guide from the Champasak Eco Guides Service at the Tourism Office in Pakse or from other major travel agencies in Pakse.





Vietnam - County Profile

Label photo



Climate

Vietnam's climate ranges from temperate in the north to tropical in the south. The four seasons are evident in the far north where winter temperatures can dramatically drop during the night, though most of the region is split between a cool winter (November to April) and a hot summer (May to October). The southern climate is similar to that of other Southeast Asian countries: cool and dry from November to January, hot and dry from February to May and hot and rainy from June to October with an occasional typhoon.

Location & Geography

Vietnam's 3,260-km South China Sea coastline defines the Mekong Sub-region's northeast perimeter. The country is bordered by China to the north, Laos to the northwest and Cambodia to the southwest.

Vietnam covers 329,560 sq km, with mountains and hills in the north and east dominating three-quarters of the landscape. The fertile Mekong Delta in the south accounts for over 10% of the country's area and close to 20% of its coastline. The delta is where the final 200 km of Mekong River breaks up into the Cuu Long, or Nine Dragons.

The country is divided into five distinct geographic regions. The mountains of Viet Bac stretch from the Red River to the Gulf of Tonkin in the northeast, and the northwest mountains run from the Chinese border to Lao PDR. The Annamite Mountain Range forms Vietnam's backbone in the central region, beaches trim the east and the Mekong Delta characterises the south.

History

Vietnam's lush northern river valleys presented the perfect backdrop for civilisation to blossom. Archaeological digs reveal the existence of Stone Age man 300,000 years ago, and cave dwellers and agriculture appeared by 10,000 BC.

Patches of civilisation popped up prior to the 1st millennium BC around the Red River, central Vietnam and the Dong Nai River Delta. These were the ancient Viet people, who began paddy farming, irrigation projects and developing handicraft skills in the area that evolved into the Van Lang state.

By 1,000 BC, the Hung Vuong Dynasty controlled a kingdom from China to 500 km south of Hanoi. An Duong Vuong transformed this into the Au Lac Nation in the 3rd century BC, but in 207 BC, Chinese General Chao T'o invaded and annexed the territory to the Red River, establishing Nam Viet. In 111 BC, Chinese Han General Chiao Chih took control, thus starting 10 centuries of Chinese control.

Label photo





Label photo

Mandarin administered “Chiao Chih”, and it prospered. By the 3rd century, paper and glass items appeared, and Chiao Chih grew as a trading port. However, descendants of mandarins and Viet landowners decided to revolt in 931. They defeated the Han, and the first independent Vietnamese state was established in 939.

The Chinese Sung attacked in 967, but General Le Hoan stepped in to repel them, secure the country and set up a monarchy. In 1010, Ly Thai To took the throne, moved the capital to present-day Hanoi and founded the 200-year Ly Dynasty, while renaming the country Dai Viet in 1054. The Tran Dynasty took charge in 1225, with a centralised bureaucracy and a solid defence, which was tested in 1253 when Kubilai Kahn arrived. The Tran battled the Mongols, finally driving them out in 1287.

The Chinese Ming then set their sights on the Tran, and by 1413 controlled Dai Viet. Le Loi, a Trinh landowner, formed a group to fight the Ming, and proclaimed himself king in 1418. The Ming withdrew by 1428, and in 1460, 18-year-old King Le Thanh Tong, a Confucian scholar, ushered in the “The Flood of Virtue” era. He died in 1497, and chaos ensued until 1527 when Mac Dang Dung usurped the throne. The Trinh revolted, and battled the Mac over Hanoi for 60 years, finally defeating them in 1592. War broke out between the southern

Nguyen and the Trinh in 1622, ending in a stalemate and peace in 1673, which divided Vietnam in two. The Nguyen began expanding south, pushing the Khmer out of Saigon in 1700 and driving deeper towards Phnom Penh, when in 1771, the Siamese came to help expel them. This triggered three brothers from Tay Son to revolt against their Nguyen lord. The Trinh then ended their truce and attacked Saigon in 1776.

The Tay Son drove the Trinh to China, and then the brothers clashed for control. Hearing of the chaos, an exiled Nguyen ruler returned with the French and retook the country in 1802. Nguyen Anh Gia Long ascended to the throne and founded Vietnam’s final dynasty. In 1858, the French invaded, the Nguyens eventually gave in, and the country became a French protectorate in 1884 with the French appointing all subsequent emperors through Bao Dai, who abdicated to Ho Chi Minh after World War II. Led by Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the subsequent Geneva Accord divided the country into north and south. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north sided with China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, while the United States backed the Republic of South Vietnam. War between the two broke out in 1965, and raged until the US pulled out in 1975.

Today’s unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam was established on 25 April 1976, with its capital in Hanoi, not far from where the Viet people got their start over 10,000 years ago.

People

Of Vietnam's 85 million inhabitants, nearly 90% are Kinh Viet. The remainder is made up of 53 ethnic minorities. Most of the Viet originated from the Mongoloid race in Northeast Asia. Many of the minorities only have a few thousand members, but maintain their distinct identities and languages.

Vietnam's 54 ethnicities can be grouped into eight linguistic categories. The Viet consist of four sub-cultures, the Tay have eight with less than 4% of the population, and the Mon-Khmer have 21 with less than 2%. The five remaining categories fall under the Pa Then: Mong (3), Kadai (4), Nam Dao (5), Han (3) and Tang (6).

The Viet mostly live in the coastal plains and delta areas. The Tay inhabit the northern mountains, while the Khmer reside around the Mekong Delta near Cambodia. The Han Hoa are also lowlanders.

Language

Today's distinct Vietnamese language reflects its mixed racial and cultural history, and is mostly a fusion of Mon Khmer (monotonic), Tai (tonality and grammar) and Chinese (literary and technical vocabulary). The "Chunbom" writing system using modified Chinese characters was developed for writing Vietnamese in the 8th century. Around 1650, a French missionary devised the "Quoc-ngu" system using the Roman alphabet with additional signs and accent marks to indicate tones. The French made this the official written language in 1910.

Ethnic minorities retain their native languages, and many foreign languages are spoken, with Chinese, Russian, French and English among the most popular.

Religion

Buddhism is the largest established religion in Vietnam, with about 10 million followers. Confucianism and Taoism were widespread during earlier Chinese domination, but Catholicism, introduced by European missionaries, is now the second most popular religion with some six million believers. Tho Mau originated in the north and was integrated into indigenous beliefs such as the Thien Yana in Hue and Linh Son in Tay Ninh. Cao Dai was introduced in 1926 with its central church in Tay Ninh and it has an estimated two million followers. The Hoa Hoa sect was introduced in 1939 in southern and western Vietnam, and today has some one million followers.

Economy

Vietnam's economy has been expanding 7-9% a year since 1986, though this growth was hampered by the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Over the past two decades, the country's output has started shifting from agriculture to industry, while the poverty rate has substantially decreased. The main agricultural products include paddy rice, coffee, rubber, cotton and tea. Vietnam's industry focuses on food processing, garments and shoes, machinery, coal mining and construction materials. The country's top exports are crude oil, marine products and its major agricultural and industrial products. Vietnam is working to create jobs to meet the challenge of its rapidly growing labour force.

Label photo



Festivals and Events

Most Vietnamese festivals follow the lunar calendar, so the dates vary from year to year. Some of the most important festivals include:

Late-January or early-February

Tet – Vietnamese and Chinese New Year – The Tet festival started thousands of years ago when Vietnamese farmers held celebrations to thank the gods for the arrival of spring.

Today's three-day festival can last a week, with the first day noted for indulging in food and drink. This is also a time to show respect to elders by bringing them food.

March

Hai Ba Trung Day – This holiday, held on sixth day of second lunar month, celebrates the revolt of the Trung sisters against the Chinese in 40 AD.

Thanh Minh – On the “Holiday of the Dead” people pay homage to deceased ancestors by visiting their graves with offerings of food, flowers and incense.

Label photo



label photo

April

Liberation Day for South Vietnam – General celebrations take place to commemorate the fall of Saigon and the final victory by the North Vietnam Army in 1975.

May

Doan Ngo – Summer Solstice Day is held on the fifth day of the fifth moon when offerings are made to the spirit world to ward off pestilence and disease.

August

Children's Moon Festival – Tet-Trung-Thu is celebrated on the eighth month of the oriental calendar and is held to promote education, culture, music, art, poetry and sports. The festival begins at noon and ends at midnight, and features activities such as games, lantern processions, dance performances and martial arts demonstrations.

Day of Wandering Souls – The spirits of the dead are believed to visit their offspring's homes. Celebrations are held at Buddhist temples and food is offered at family alters.

Nature

Vietnam is dedicated to preserving its vast natural resources, boasting well over 80 national parks and protected areas throughout the country. The most famous is Halong Bay in the north with thousands of oddly-shaped limestone island outcrops filled with caves.

Just south of Hanoi is Cuc Phuong National Park, home to over 97 mammal species, including the endangered langur, and 300 species of birds.

Label photo



Vietnam's largest national park, Yokdon, covers 1,155 sq km of relatively flat land, and was founded in 1991 to protect a rare patch of lowland dipterocarp forest with 464 species of flora and scores of mammal, reptile, bird, and fish species including 17 listed as endangered.

Among Vietnam's critically endangered mammals are the Cat Ba Island golden-headed langur, Javan rhinoceros, Sumatran rhinoceros and the white-rumped black lemur. Endangered Asian elephants, tigers, otter civets and parti-coloured flying squirrels have also been spotted.

Vietnam possesses a diversity of wetland habitats including large estuarine and delta systems with extensive mangrove swamps and tidal mudflats. This habitat and others in Vietnam are home to approximately 870 bird species, which make up 10% of the world's species. The Dalat Plateau is one of the five endemic bird areas (EBAs) in Vietnam identified by BirdLife International. This mixture of coniferous, mountain evergreen and secondary forest is the exclusive habitat of collared laughing thrushes, grey-crowned crocias and Vietnamese green finches. Visitors to Cat Tien National Park can spot wide-spread birds such as red-breasted parakeets, vernal hanging parrots, spotted and red-collared doves, drongo cuckoos and Oriental pied hornbills.

Label photo



developing the nation's tourism infrastructure especially at the provincial level, increasing the capabilities of its human resources, creating convenient travel conditions within the country and the region and providing tourism information.

Vietnam encourages investment in the tourism sector, especially hotels and aviation. It recently liberalised its skies to attract more airlines, and continues to upgrade its airports as well as rail, road and marine transport. The country also cooperates with its neighbours to promote tourism in the region.

Government Tourism Policy

The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism is the government agency responsible for the country's tourism development, planning, public relations, personnel training, research and the implementation of policies and other regulations. Assisting VNAT are provincial tourism bureaus.

The country is currently embarking on a sustainable tourism growth path to protect its environment, help alleviate poverty and maintain the cultures and traditions of its 53 ethnic minorities. Much of the current focus is on ensuring safety and security for tourists,

VIETNAM: TRAVELLER'S INFORMATION

Visas and Border Crossings

Most visitors to Vietnam require a 15- or 30-day tourist visa to enter the country, and these can be applied for at any Vietnamese embassy or consulate, either by post or in person. The fee may vary, depending on the issuing country, but the costs are usually around US\$25, and one passport-sized photo is required. Processing generally takes five days though a two-day express service is available, and this application may be faxed. A same-day express service is also available for those staying less than 15 days, and these generally take an hour to process.



Label photo

Vietnam is bordered by China, Lao PDR and Cambodia, and there are several overland border crossings to each, though many are in remote locations. The seven checkpoints into Cambodia include Moc Bai some 70 km northwest of Ho Chi Minh City, Sa Mat near Tan Bien, Chau Doc in Ang Giang province west of Ho Chi Minh City, Le Thanh in Gia Lai, Dinh Ba in Dong Thap and Xa Xia in Kien Giang. A boat checkpoint is located about 50 km north of Chau Doc on the Tien Giang (Mekong) River, which connects to Phnom Penh.

Besides a train crossing, there are three overland borders checkpoints into China. The Lao Cai border gate connects to Yunnan province in the far northwest, the Mong Cai border is on the South China Sea and serves the Guangxi coast, and the Huu Nghi crossing near Lang Son opens traffic from Hanoi to Chengzong and Nanning.

Seven border crossings connect Vietnam to Laos. The Na Meo checkpoint in Thanh Hoa province leads to northern Lao, Nam Can on Route 7 ties Vinh to Luang Prabang and Keo Nua on Route 8 allows passage from Vinh to Vientiane. The Lao Bao crossing in Quang Tri on Route 9 goes straight to Savannakhet, Laos. The Cha Lo border in Quang Binh province, Po Y in Kon Tum and Tay Trang in Dien Bien also open passage to Laos

Getting There & Away

Hanoi's Noi Bai Airport welcomes flights from 17 foreign destinations and 19 international routes service Vietnam's HCM Airport, which is being expanded. Within the Mekong Sub-region, direct flights link to Bangkok, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, while regional service connects to Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Kunming and Taipei. The Hanoi-Beijing rail line crosses the Vietnam border at Lang Son (Dong Dang).

Basic Vocabulary

seen chow (hello)
cahm un (thank you)
seen loy (sorry)
vung (yes)
khom (no)

Local Time

Vietnam is seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC.

Working Hours

Government offices are open Monday through Friday, eight hours a day from 0730 to 1630 with an hour off for lunch. Banks are open Monday through Friday from 0730 or 0800 until 1130 and again from 1300 to 1600. Government offices and banks are closed on Saturday and Sunday. Private shops are generally open from 0800 or 0830 until 2100 to 2200.

Keeping Healthy

No vaccinations are officially required to visit Vietnam, but local medical authorities recommend protection against polio, diphtheria, typhoid, tetanus, hepatitis A and B, and Japanese encephalitis. For travellers spending time in the countryside, precautions should be taken to not get bitten by mosquitoes. Repellents and mosquito nets are necessary.

All travellers are advised to bring required prescription medications in the original containers. You should pack a small medical kit, which includes sunscreen, insect repellent, diarrhoea medication, ibuprofen or aspirin and antibacterial ointments. For those who wear eyeglasses, bring an extra pair, as the quality of local replacements vary.

Medical care facilities are available in the largest cities, but are limited outside of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Travellers should consult with their insurance companies to determine whether coverage is included for Vietnam, as care is expensive, and often requires evacuation to nearby countries such as Thailand.

Pharmacies carry most common medicines and antibiotics at a reasonable price, and prescriptions are rarely needed. Though there are many tropical diseases, the most common ailments inflicting travellers are diarrhoea, upset stomachs and dehydration. The best advice is to use common sense, avoid tap water and drink plenty of bottled water.

Money

Vietnam's official currency is the dong (VND), though US dollars are widely accepted. VND paper notes come in the following denominations: 500,000, 200,000, 100,000, 50,000, 20,000, 10,000, 5,000, 2,000, 1,000, 500, 200 and 100. Coins include VND 5,000; 2,000; 1,000; 500 and 200. VND 1,000,000 and 500,000 cheques are also available. Foreign currencies and travellers cheques can be exchanged into VND at banks or foreign exchange agencies throughout the country. Credit cards are generally accepted in cities



Label photo

and large tourist centres, but most shops prefer cash. ATMs are also readily available in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as well as other major cities such as Danang, Nha Trang, Vinh and Hue.

Bargaining is very much a part of the Vietnamese way of life, and almost everything except meals is negotiable. Don't bargain just for the sake of it; if your price is agreed, then you are honour bound to make the purchase. Don't waste time and energy haggling over what only amounts to a few cents. Tourists are regarded as wealthy, but small shopkeepers and restaurateurs usually charge the local rate.

Embassies & Consulates

The following embassies are found in Hanoi (telephone code 84-4) though many countries also have consulates in Ho Chi Minh City:

Australia : 831 7755; 8 Dao Tan St
 Cambodia : 942 4788; 71 Tran Hung Dao St
 Canada : 734 5000; 31 Hung Vuong St
 China : 845 3736; 256 46 Hoang Dieu St
 France : 943 7719; 57 Tran Hung Dao St
 Germany : 845 3836/ 7; 29 Tran Phu St
 Laos : 942 4576; 22 Tran Binh Trong St
 Malaysia : 734 3836; 43 - 45 Dien Bien Phu St
 Singapore : 823 3965/ 6; 41 Tran Phu St
 Thailand : 823 5092/ 4; 63-65 Hoang Dieu Str
 UK : 936 0500; 31 Hai Ba Trung
 USA : 772 1500; 7 Lang Ha St

Emergency Contact Numbers

General emergency telephone numbers in Vietnam are:

Ambulance	115
Fire	114
Police	113

In Hanoi, an emergency International SOS line is available (04-934-0555). The best facilities for receiving medical attention are Family Medical Practice (04 843 0748), Viet Duc Hospital (04 828-9852) and the Hanoi French Hospital (04 574 1111).

The Ho Chi Minh City police (08 99398) can be reached in the day time. For major medical emergencies, contact Asia Emergency Assistance (08 829-4386). The better medical facilities include Centre Medical International (24-Hour Emergency Number, 08 865 4025), Cho Ray Hospital (24-Hour Emergency Number: 08 855 4137), the Franco-Vietnamese Hospital (08 411 3333) and Grand Dentistry (08 821 9446).

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

Out of politeness, always ask permission before taking photos of people and places of worship. Remove your shoes before entering Buddhist pagodas. You may place small donations in boxes found in the temples, as this helps pay for their upkeep.

A gentle handshake and a smile is the most appropriate manner of greeting. Be firm yet diplomatic when dealing with officials who can be rigid. In case of a misunderstanding, patience and good humour is the best policy.

Small gifts such as foreign cigarettes, lighters, pens, liquor and perfume are generally appreciated by people you may befriend or who assist you. If you are spotted giving money to street beggars, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, you may be mobbed by others. A donation to a reputable charity is considered a better alternative.

Please refer to Laos' Cultural Do's and Don'ts on page 68 for additional suggestions.

Label photo





Vietnam Activities




CAMBODIA



Stay with the Tay

 **Activity:** Asian Encounters – Ta Van Commune.

 **Location:** Sapa, Lao Cai.

 **Tip:** Reservations must be made via the website in advance.

Immerse yourself in the culture of an out-of-the-way ethnic village that offers simple, but clean accommodation and guided treks in the surrounding hills and valleys.

The experience: Asian Encounters provides poor Asian communities with information and communication technologies to help them promote local tourism to global travellers. In Vietnam, the organisation is establishing “e-Community Based Tourism” in the northern rural village of Ta Van. Ta Van is being developed as a sustainable pro-poor tourism destination in the mountains of northeast Vietnam’s Sapa district in Lao Cai province.

At 1,816 metres and only 30 km from the Red River and the Chinese border, Ta Van is home to the Tay, a rice-growing people who live in wooden or bamboo houses on stilts. A homestay in Ta Van provides a close-up insight into the colourfully dressed Tay and their lifestyle. Visitors spend most of their time socialising with the locals and chatting in English with youngsters.

Ta Van View



A Tay Child

The distant village also provides a good base for guided treks, led by locals, among tiered rice fields in the surrounding mountains and valleys. Ta Van operates a website linked to Asian Encounters’ home page that helps the village pinpoint visitors seeking a genuine cultural and environmental encounter. It presents travellers with an honest, informative picture of the community, its people, food and accommodation. Around 10 farming households offer basic but clean and comfortable lodging that can only be booked over the website.

How it helps: Asian Encounters’ IT efforts in Ta Van place the villagers in control of their tourism. The community manages the website’s content, which they use to directly reach travellers worldwide and cut out the middleman. This cost-effective marketing approach aims to place more of tourism income into Ta Van residents’ hands. Ta Van operates all its tourist enterprises – lodging, tours, dining and craft sales – and the website assists the community in connecting to tourists, who are seeking a truly authentic experience. At the same time, Ta Van’s website avoids attracting crowds of mainstream tourists, which could damage the local environment and negatively impact their culture. Tech-savvy travellers searching for a responsible tourism destination will be drawn to Ta Van, while agents steer the others elsewhere. Asian Encounters’ website initiative in Ta Van is serving as a prototype for further local internet development in areas such as health, education, agriculture and enterprise development.


Contact and booking information

Asian Encounters
 Roger Harris
 5B Angel Court, Ville de Cascade, 2 Lai Wo Lane, Fo Tan,
 Shatin, Hong Kong
 Tel: (+852) 2698 6134
 E-mail: harris38@netvigador.com
 Web: www.asianencounters.org/community/tavan
 (booking is done over the website only and not through
 Dr Harris)

Dine for the Kids

 **Activity:** The Blue Dragon Restaurant.

 **Location:** Hoi An, Quang Nam.

 **Tip:** Read the blog on the website and then bring a big appetite.

While in Hoi An, enjoy a hearty Vietnamese meal in a restaurant staffed by ex-street kids. Part of the profits go to education, health and food for street kids and orphans.

The experience: Far from the run-of-the-mill eatery and a place to relax with a drink, the Blue Dragon restaurant's friendly service and delicious meals are delivered by staff from disadvantaged backgrounds. Owner Mr Nam, who works with street kids, opened the restaurant in 2003 with funding from the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation. In return, Mr Nam donates 5% of his profits to the small local NGO.

Located near the market with a view of the river, the Blue Dragon restaurant features a range of tasty dishes, including its signature, fried wonton. Steaming deep-fried spring rolls, spicy crab and spinach with shrimp are among other big hits. No trip to the Blue Dragon is complete without a sip of its popular coconut rum.

The blue dragon restaurant



Interior View

The restaurant displays products created by beneficiaries of the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation. Their line up includes honey, sports shirts, art work, greeting cards photos and jewellery. The young people involved in producing the merchandise earn money from their sales.

Private cooking classes can be arranged in which participants select menu items to learn to prepare. Everyone has a youngster as an assistant, while going step by step through the recipes, from raw ingredients to a meal to enjoy after the class.

How it helps: Aside from enjoying a great meal and service, the Blue Dragon restaurant's patrons dine knowing they are contributing to charity without having it added to the bill. Part of the restaurant's profits go into local projects, such as paying for teachers at a local pagoda and providing fruit to children in orphanages. Other funds are directed to the Blue Orphan's Children's Foundation's three official projects.

The Hoi An Street Children's Centre receives donations for school fees, food and health insurance for 60 students. The Step Ahead programme, based in Hanoi, supports 150 street children or those with disabilities, and Stay in School helps rural youngsters continue their education in Bac Ninh province.

Kids who Mr Nam guided through training at the Blue Dragon have gone on to work as waiters and trainee chefs at The Vine, one of Hanoi's finest dining establishments.

Location and contact information

Blue Dragon Restaurant
46 Bach Dang, Hoi An, Quang Nam, Viet Nam
(The restaurant is near the market facing the river)
Tel: (+845) [10] 910742
E-mail: bluedragon@bdcf.org
Web: www.bdcf.org/restaurant.html
Open 0900-1000 daily

Pioneers of Low Impact

 **Activity:** Buffalo Tours.

 **Location:** Mai Chau, Hoa Binh province.

 **Tip:** Cyclists should be in good condition.

Award-winning Buffalo Tours pioneered low-impact treks and cycle trips in Mai Chau. Volunteer projects and homestays build authentic cultural exchanges between visitors and villagers.

The experience: Buffalo Tours began taking tourists off the beaten track in the mid 1990s, providing those searching for an authentic experience with two-way cultural exchanges at local communities. Since then, Buffalo Tours has established a tight bond with grass-roots residents and ethnic minorities.

Buffalo Tours specialises in private and or small-group nature tours to ensure a low-impact experience. Their trekking and cycling expeditions enable travellers to see Vietnam's stunning scenery by day and immerse themselves in its culture with homestays at night.



Boy on a Buffalo

As the frontrunners in responsible tourism to Mai Chau, Buffalo Tours offers exclusive expeditions to this fascinating hilltribe region located in the northwest highlands just 135 kms from Hanoi. Biking and trekking trips are available, and both present a balance between culture and adventure.

Buffalo Tours' six-day hilltribe "Discovery Trek" roams the mountainside, stopping at six villages inhabited by ethnic minorities including the White Thai, Hmong, Muong and Zao. Trekkers experience local cuisine and spend their night in stilt houses in the isolated villages of Hang Kia, Van, Xo, Poong Cong and Nahn.

More strenuous, but a great way to absorb Vietnam's northern mountains, is Buffalo Tours' four-day cycling journey to Mai Chau. Tours kick off in Hanoi with an 80-km jaunt to Hoa Binh town. The next day's steep 65-km leg lands in Lac for the night's stay. After visiting a handful of ethnic hamlets, day three's ride heads downhill to Van for an overnight in a stilt house. The final stint is the toughest, but wraps up with a relaxing support vehicle cruise back to Hanoi.

Buffalo Tours was also the first travel company in Vietnam to offer volunteer travel programmes, combining a placement at a grassroots projects with excursions throughout the region. The company continues as a leader in volunteer projects in Vietnam.

In recognition of Buffalo Tour's achievements, the Pacific Asia Travel Association presented company CEO Tran Trong Kien with its 2007 "Face of the Future Award" for his positive contribution to local communities in promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Trekking





Cycling

How it helps: Since opening up Mai Chau to tourism, Buffalo Tours has been instrumental in conserving the local hilltribes' cultures. Tourism has enabled villagers to remain in the land of their ancestors and continue age-old traditions such as weaving and farming while generating income through homestays. The alternative is moving to urban areas to work in factories and shops.

Buffalo Tours homestay development in the Mai Chau region has educated the locals on the concept of sustainable tourism and how it improves their local economy. Villagers are encouraged to charge on a per-night basis, sell their handicrafts to visitors, preserve their ethnic dress and take pride in their traditions. Buffalo Tours also explains Western culture to the villagers and why foreign travellers are interested in Vietnamese hilltribes.

Buffalo Tours educates clients prior to their trips with pre-departure fact sheets and responsible tourism guidelines that cover cultural, social and environmental issues. Further, 100% of Buffalo Tour guides are locals and trained on environmental protection in areas where they take tourists trekking. They also receive cultural training on the ethnic minority tribes they visit with their groups.

Food is purchased and produced for the treks by the local communities. Buffalo Tours has long-standing relationships with these suppliers and ensures their hygiene and environmental practices meet sustainable standards. The company also assists Mai Chau communities with recycling efforts, and provides crops and water buffalos for farming, water wells and composts for waste.

Once a year, Buffalo Tours operates medical treks to the Mai Chau region to treat hilltribes. Both local and international doctors embark on house calls and take local/traditional medicine and treatments into consideration.

Independent studies by NGOs have confirmed that in the Mai Chau region, local communities are satisfied with the contribution Buffalo Tours is making to their lives.

The company's efforts and donations (US\$50,000 in 2006) have contributed to poverty reduction, better labour conditions and better farming techniques. The contributions have also built schools (with World Expeditions) and have given hope to a region stricken by poverty.



Contact and booking information

Buffalo Tours

94 Ma May Street, Hanoi, Vietnam




Tel: (+84) 510 910742

Fax: (+84) 482 69370

E-mail: susannah.newell@buffalotours.com

Web: www.buffalotours.com

Shop for Ethnic Crafts

-  **Activity:** Craft Link handicrafts.
-  **Location:** Dong Da district, Hanoi.
-  **Tip:** There is a Craft Link outlet in the Museum of Ethnology.



Hmong Embroidery

Browse for crafts created by a diverse group of Vietnamese ethnic minorities in a shop once visited by former US President Bill Clinton.

The experience: Craft Link was established in 1996 as a non-profit organisation to provide ethnic minorities and the disadvantaged with the chance to earn a fair wage and keep their culture alive through crafts.

Visitors to Craft Links Hanoi shops on Van Mieu Street or in the Museum of Ethnology get much more than a selection of crafts produced by dozens of different ethnic minorities. Browsing through the shop creates awareness in Vietnam's multi-ethnic fabric, as information on the handicrafts and their producers reveals the origins of the designs and patterns and the traditional skills used to make them.

Craft Link offers shoppers a variety of high-quality handicraft items with functional value as well as cultural significance. The shop overflows with Ta Oi

baskets, Dao ornaments, Nung embroidered cushion covers, Black Thai blankets and Hemp purses with Hmong appliques. The artisans also use their traditional patterns, designs and skills to produce modern products, so each retains a touch of their culture. The Craft Link business team manages the wholesale, retail and export of handicrafts produced throughout Vietnam, and practices fair trade, ensuring that the producers earn fair wages. Craft Link also coordinates exhibitions and bazaars to raise awareness of ethnic minority crafts and culture.

How it helps: Craft Link supports poor ethnic minority groups, disadvantaged people and remote villages in reviving and maintaining their traditions and culture while providing a reasonable income through handicraft production. As a member of the International Fair Trade Association, Craft Link guarantees profits from sales go directly to the artisans. The organisation provides training in management practices, bookkeeping, pricing, product development and marketing to place more control of the entire commercial process in the hands of the producers. The development and design team further assists the artisans by implementing income-generating projects. Craft Link educates producers on how to protect the environment in their daily lives as well as in their production processes. The organisation closely cooperates with NGOs and INGOs such as CARE and the UN Drug Control Programme to execute the handicraft components of their poverty alleviation programmes.

CraftLink interior shop




Location and contact information

Craft Link
 43 Van Mieu Street, Dong Da district, Hanoi
 Tel: (+84) [0] 4733 6101
 Fax: (+84) [0] 4843 7926
 E-mail: crafterlink@fpt.vn
 Web: www.crafterlink-vietnam.com
 Open daily 0900-1800 (closed 1215-1315)
 At the Museum of Ethnology: 0830-1730 (closed Mondays)

Disabilities Overcome

 **Activity name:** Reaching Out - Hòa Nhập Handicrafts

 **Location:** Hoi An, Viet Nam

 **Tip:** n/a

A pioneering workshop in Hoi An helps 20 craftsmen and women overcome their disabilities to produce quality ceramics, leatherwear, embroidery, weaving, metalwork and paper crafts.

The experience: Wheelchair-bound Le Nguyen Binh had risen above his disability and wanted to help others facing a similar situation. To this end, he founded Reaching Out (Hòa Nhập) Handicrafts to provide the physically challenged with skills training to “turn their disabilities into abilities,” so they can lead a productive life and achieve a higher level of independence. In 2000, Reaching Out established its workshop in Hoi An and began training disabled young people in embroidery, sewing, weaving, metalwork and paper crafts. The following year, it opened an in-house gift shop, the first of its kind in Vietnam, to sell the artisan’s handicrafts and provide them with a fair wage.

Reaching Out offers free 15-20-minute guided tours of its workshop. Visitors get the chance to meet the craftspeople and to see how they create their range of handicrafts. The Reaching Out gift shop overflows with items produced by its artisans. It isn’t a place for bargain hunters, but for those searching for high-quality products at reasonable prices.



The handicraft artisans of Reaching Out

Shoppers find a selection of home decorations, from embroidered wall hangings and sandstone figures to ceramic and brass tea sets and beaded candleholders. The shop also carries a line of stationary items including bookmarks, notebooks and cards. A variety of toys and dolls will charm the kids, while adults can browse among the handbags, jewellery and accessories like wallets and cell phone holders. The shop also features a collection of intricately designed, traditional ethnic clothing and colourful scarves. All of Reaching Out’s crafts and gifts reflect Vietnam’s culture and keep alive traditional skills, techniques, materials and designs that have been handed down over the years. The shop has a fixed-price policy, and customers are assured all crafts are made with high-quality materials by workers who receive training, fair market wages plus bonuses and daily lunch allowances. All profits go into further developing the business and to support community programmes that “turn disabilities into abilities.”

How it helps: Reaching Out employs around 20 physically challenged artisans in its workshop. It also continues to train young craftspeople with 30-student classes that last up to five months and assists graduates in finding suitable employment. Home-based producers benefit from a support programme, which provides on-the-job training, start-up capital and financial management assistance, advice on design and development and help in building a sales and distribution network.

Location and contact information

Reaching Out
103 Nguyen Thai Hoc (beside Tan Ky Old House)
Hours: 0800-2100 daily
Workshop: Tuesday-Saturday 0800-1200 and 1330-1700
Tel: (+845) 10 910168
E-mail: hoanhap@yahoo.com, hoanhap@gmail.com
Web: www.reachingoutvietnam.com

British sales representative
Contact: Emma Gittens
58 Geldeston Road
London E5 8SB
E-mail: reachingoutvietnam@yahoo.com




Their products keep alive Vietnam's traditional arts

Northern Adventures

 **Activity:** BikeHike Adventures.

 **Location:** Hanoi and Northern Vietnam.

 **Tip:** Be in moderately good shape for biking the hills.

Pedal, walk and paddle your way through northern Vietnam for a closer look at various ethnic groups.

The experience: BikeHike Adventures offers a 12-day multi-sport tour that explores the country's north on mountain bikes, by foot and aboard sea kayaks. Vietnamese guides lead small groups of between two and 12 on a circuit that stops in Sapa, Bah Ha and Lao Cai. Extensions are available to Hoi An in the central region and farther south to take in the Mekong Delta. Tours can also be customised for families, honeymooners or private groups.

Mixing with the locals to provide a deeper cultural experience is a key element in BikeHike's tours, and they achieve this through their choice of transportation. Rather than sit on a bus to get from A to B, participants take local transport and use muscle power whenever possible to leave the beaten track and get the opportunity to interact more with the people.

Exploring the village



Sea Kayaking

Most days are spent in the outdoors, biking and hiking towards the next destination. Accommodation runs a range from two homestays in hilltribe villages and camping out to a couple of overnight train rides in berths and rooms in tourist-quality hotels. Back in Hanoi, the tour continues by rickshaw, and visitors can enjoy a water puppet show and the city's several museums and restaurants.

How it helps: Canadian-based BikeHike has been flying the sustainable tourism banner for over a decade. It kicked off its Vietnam venture in 2004, when it joined with a Hanoi tour company that organises and operates the entire itinerary to ensure more of the revenue stays in the country. BikeHike strives to respect the culture of the villages they visit by operating sensitive adventures that view local communities as partners. By keeping the group size less than 12 per trip, and generally around six to eight, travellers cause little disruption to the residents' lifestyles, and leave a minimal ecological impact. The result: people on the tour gain a better appreciation of the environs.


Small groups also allow for greater flexibility and spontaneity. They make it easier to stop by a villager's home, make impromptu visits to a village wedding, or peak inside rural schools. BikeHike stands out as an alternative choice for its multi-sport tours or 'self-propelled adventures', so there is minimal time spent in carbon dioxide-emitting cars, buses and planes, thus reducing emissions that contribute to climate change.


Location and booking information

BikeHike Adventures
1807 Maritime Mews, Suite 200
Vancouver, BC, V6H 3W7, Canada
Tel: +001 (604) 731 2442
Fax: +001 (604) 677 5514
E-mail: info@bikehike.com
Web: www.bikehike.com

Meet, Learn, Cook, Dine

 **Activity:** Connections Vietnam.

 **Location:** Ho Chi Minh City.

 **Tip:** Don't dumb down your English when talking to the students.

See the city and socialise with students. Visit a home and learn to cook local foods. Socialise and take part in an interactive cultural seminar.

The experience: For travellers to Ho Chi Minh City who are seeking to get deeper under the city's skin, Connections Vietnam offers four cultural tourism services that present a closer look. Each involves local people, especially students who are looking to practice their English skills. It also brings locals in closer contact with foreign visitors,

The 'Meet' programme matches tourists with students from Ho Chi Minh City for two to three hours. The students and their guests decide on the itinerary, giving visitors the opportunity to meet residents and see the city with them rather than tour guides. This allows the students to steer the visiting tourists away from the usual traps and towards the unseen side of the city. The 'Dine' option presents a social occasion during which a group of tourists meets students to enjoy a dinner of Vietnamese cuisine, engage in conversation and exchange cultural information. 'Cook' calls on locals with in-depth experience in preparing Vietnamese dishes. Tourists visit their homes, shop for ingredients in the market and return to cook the meal.

The 'Learn' service



Matching the tourists with students

The 'Learn' experience is a student-led presentation, in which they share their knowledge of the country and teach visitors about their culture in an interactive seminar. Some students include a basic introduction to the Vietnamese language in their discussion groups.

How it helps: Connections Vietnam's four cultural tourism options provide foreign visitors and locals the opportunity to interact to create a better cultural understanding between the host and the tourist. Ho Chi Minh City students benefit by having the chance to practice their language skills and earn money through part-time work.

Each of the tour programmes leaves a positive impact by building relationships between Vietnamese youth and overseas visitors, while giving holidaymakers and travellers a much greater insight into the real lifestyles of the Vietnamese. The 'Learn' service further provides students with the chance to use their presentation and social skills, which aids in their professional development.

The entire focus of Connections Vietnam is to provide tourists with a greater awareness of cultural, social and environmental issues in Ho Chi Minh City. The initiative is looking to expand to other Vietnamese cities in the near future.


Contact and booking information

Connections Vietnam
Jon Hoff
16/05 Chung Cu Mieu Noi
Ho Chi Minh City
Tel: (+84) [0] 90 444 6302
Fax: (+84) [0] 8 517 0053
E-mail: jon@connectionsvietnam.com
Web: www.connectionsvietnam.com

Tours Not for ‘Softies’

 **Activity:** Haivenu.

 **Location:** Hanoi and Northern Vietnam.

 **Tip:** Be ready to rough it.

Two-week expeditions take tourists, who are willing to do without comforts, for a memorable experience to seldom-visited ethnic minority villages.

The experience: For visitors willing to take that extra step to experience ethnic minority villages and immerse themselves in their culture, Haivenu veers away from the usual tourist routes and into the thick of Vietnam.

Among its tailor-made packages, Haivenu presents what it calls “Unusual Tours” that aren’t for “softies”. The adventurous trade in their beds for mats on the floor in communal rooms and swap conventional bathrooms for water-bucket showers and al fresco toilets that are holes in the ground. However, there is plenty of rice wine to smooth over the lack of comforts and an assortment of interesting local dishes to try along the way.

To really get your hands dirty, Haivenu offers a two-week Hiking and Helping tour. Adventurers can start with three days in the northeast mountains around Sapa, staying in villages, working in the fields, doing domestic chores and joining in traditional games.



An Haivenu ethnic girl

After a day off in Hanoi, the expedition moves 160 km south to Mai Chau and the entry to Pu Luong, a thickly forested valley wedged between limestone karsts. A sampan sails away from the somewhat commercialised Mai Chau, and then it is four days of hiking to small hamlets with different ethnic groups. After another breather in Hanoi, the journey ends with a more typical holiday in Hoi An and its nearby beach.

The Path Least Trodden is another two-week tour that can kick off with the Pu Luong leg before moving to the Central Highlands near Cambodia for six days with various ethnic minorities. The excursion stops in tiny villages like Pleiku, Kon Tum and Buon Ma Thuot and visits Bahnar rong houses and Jarai funeral houses adorned with humorous and risqué wooden carvings. Nights are spent in rong, still and long houses, while days go by with easy treks, a lake crossing in a dugout canoe and a raft trip down a lazy river. After a break in Ho Chi Minh City, the journey winds up on Con Dao Island, 140 km off the coast of southern Vietnam.

Hue



Shorter tours are also available for “softies”, but the more visitors are willing to walk away from modern comforts, the closer they’ll get to the various cultures. Each tour group is guided by a Personal Tour Operator who remains with the customers to the very end.

How it helps: Haivenu is a wholly-owned Vietnamese company, and apart from one foreign consultant, all Haivenu’s employees and guides are locals, who receive a good basic salary and enjoy a profit-sharing scheme. It also hires local freelance guides with experience and knowledge of cultural traditions, and who can explain the cultural heritage of the people and places visited.



Haivenu puppets

The company unveiled its responsible tourism policy in 2004 after a series of workshops involving every member of staff. The result is assistance for several small environmental, cultural, conservation and poverty alleviation programmes. Haivenu works with the Cat Bo Langur Project, which is committed to protecting the 59 known surviving langurs of this species on Cat Bo Island in Ha Long Bay. The company has also partnered with Flora and Fauna International (FFI) in two remote forested patches in the northern Vietnam's mountains to protect populations of Tonkin snub-nosed monkeys and Cao Vit gibbons.

Haivenu is further assisting FFI in Mai Chau's communal initiative started by villagers, who set up their own homestay arrangement, which became quite commercialised. The current project is focussing on sustainable development that conserves the environment and the local culture.

Kids village



Over the years, the company has built strong links with craftspeople, artists, singers and musicians who are maintaining threatened traditions, and offers tourists the opportunity to meet them. It is also involved in a large-scale project aimed at building the capacity of poor farmers in remote areas of 14 provinces.

Wherever possible, Haivenu contracts indigenous suppliers and assists them in improving the quality of their services. It has introduced a scheme for young entrepreneurs with relevant skills to work on a contract basis while participating in Haivenu's training programme. They then receive assistance in registering and setting up their own businesses, while continuing to be contracted by Haivenu.

Along with its range of tour ideas covering interests from heritage sites to veteran's tours, a comprehensive database with the culture and traditions of Vietnam and the rest of Indochina is provided on Haivenu's website. The site also provides information on the company's responsible tourism policy and the projects in which it is engaged.

Contact and booking information

Haivenu Co

Mr Dong Minh Tuan, Deputy Director
12 Nguyen Trung Truc Street, Ba Dinh District
Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (84) [0] 4 927 2917
Fax: (84) [0] 4 927 2916
E-mail: tuan@haivenu-vietnam.com
Web: www.haivenu-vietnam.com

Know One, Teach One

 **Activity:** KOTO Restaurant.

 **Location:** Hanoi.

 **Tip:** Order a mix of Vietnamese and western cuisine and give them constructive feedback.

This increasingly popular restaurant pulls street children from the poverty cycle to work on the staff and graduate into higher-level positions.

The experience: Tourists can discover a dining experience that is delivered with a smile from young people, who have been empowered to change their lives, at KOTO restaurant. KOTO stands for “Know One Teach One”. All the restaurant’s trainees come from disadvantaged backgrounds. KOTO teaches them how to prepare and serve a blend of western and Vietnamese dishes and French-inspired pastries at the restaurant located directly opposite the Temple of Literature and just a five-minute taxi drive from Hanoi’s old quarter.

KOTO got its start in 1999 when Jimmy Pham, an Australian-Vietnamese tour guide, was overwhelmed by the vast number of street children he met in Hanoi. He decided to do something about it, and with funds borrowed from his mother, Jimmy opened a small sandwich shop to train and give jobs to the street kids he had befriended. Word quickly spread, and the sandwich shop became swamped with both patrons and potential trainees. This overwhelming response prompted Jimmy to enlist the help of Australian chef Tracey Lister to set up the first KOTO restaurant in 2000.



The chef and his trainees

Building on its success, KOTO sought a larger and more modern restaurant to serve its growing clientele while providing training opportunities for more street children. In 2007, KOTO took over the building next door at 59 Van Mieu and opened its new restaurant. As at the old establishment, diners receive “great food and service for a great cause”, but with added features. Couples can enjoy a candlelit dinner on the roof terrace, and the new bar presents a range of classic cocktails. Ms Ha, one of KOTO’s first graduates, offers group cooking classes in which participants learn the secrets behind Vietnamese street food while getting the chance to meet the current crop of trainees.

How it helps: KOTO targets extremely disadvantaged 16-to-22-year-olds. By building on the basic schooling these young people had, KOTO guides them through an internationally recognised hospitality course, at the end of which they are qualified to work in the hospitality industry. During the 18-month course, students are taught English, sex education, conflict management, financial and other career skills. Trainees are also provided with housing, medical checkups and insurance as well as a training allowance, so they can send money back to their families. KOTO has a 100% success rate in placing graduates in meaningful hospitality jobs. Koto contributes to the conservation of Vietnam’s cultural heritage by teaching its students how to cook traditional dishes such as Bun Cha and Bun Bo Nam Bo, which are served alongside the western offerings.

Location and contact information

KOTO
59 Van Mieu St, Dong Da District, Hanoi
(opposite the Temple of Literature)
Tel: (84) [0] 4 847 3492
Fax: (84) [0] 4 843 3840


E-mail: dao@koto.netnam.vn
customerservice_koto@netnam.vn
Web: www.koto.com.au
Open 0700-2300 daily (closes 1700 Mondays)



Food's Good, Not 'Sozo'

 **Activity:** Sozo Café and Student Centre.

 **Location:** Ho Chi Minh City.

 **Tip:** Don't be afraid to make suggestions and get into the kitchen to help them.



Simple food sales evolved into a social platform for students and the disabled to earn some money, some respect, and make a difference.

The experience: What started as a small street-side stand selling cookies in 2004 quickly expanded into the Sozo Café on Bui Vien Street the next year, followed by the Sozo Student Centre on Su Van Hanh in 2006. Inside the café, visitors find a wide variety of freshly baked cookies and cakes, simple western and Vietnamese meals along with a choice of coffee, juices and bubble tea, with cheerful service provided by disabled and underprivileged Vietnamese and their children.

Visitors are encouraged to suggest menu items and actually teach the staff how to bake new treats or drinks, and Sozo will even schedule a few days for training. Sozo also welcomes tourists to join the staff and students for English corner, cultural exchanges, trips to the Mekong Delta and game night. This provides an enjoyable and memorable experience for tourists while helping them understand the Vietnamese and their culture.

Sozo shop



Sozo offers free wi-fi internet access and computers for its customers as well as a variety of handicrafts made by locals and souvenirs like mugs and t-shirts. Both locations are easily accessed by the physically challenged with ramps from the street and non-restrictive entrance doors.




How it helps: Both Sozo locations employ and train disadvantaged Vietnamese and their children in specific work skills, with the aim of preparing them for outside jobs. Staff are also sent to vocational schools, computer classes or even back to high school if needed. The café and student centre are run in partnership with local Vietnamese and all the staff are involved in certain management aspects of the decision making process.

The Sozo Student Centre is the first of its kind in Vietnam, and encourages the students to reach out to their communities. Students also assist in working at both shops, which aim to create a model for local businesses and other students, so they think differently about the disadvantaged in their country. Many of the staff are disabled, and Sozo focuses on their strengths rather than their physical disabilities to restore hope and change lives, not only for the staff but the people with whom they come in contact. Sozo is currently developing a student volunteer network throughout Vietnam to equip university students with the skills and opportunities to work in their own communities. This is being achieved by linking with other volunteer projects and NGOs.

Location and contact information

Maxine Raabe
 Sozo
 176 Bui Vien, District 1
 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
 Tel: (84) [0] 90 886 3685
 Fax: (+1) 425 799 1269
 E-mail: sozovietnam@mac.com, sozoasia@mac.com
 Web: www.sozoasia.com; www.sozocentre.com
 Open daily 0700-2300

Nature Lovers Do It Here

-  **Activity:** Exotissimo Travel.
-  **Location:** Throughout Vietnam.
-  **Tip:** Read the company's "Responsible Travel, Make a Difference!" and "Exocares".

Three signature tours by Exotissimo cater to the responsible visitor who wants an in-depth, nature-based experience of Vietnam.

The experience: Exotissimo Travel ranks among the pioneers of tourism in Vietnam. Since its 1993 start has offered eco-adventure packages that keep social and environmental awareness at the forefront. The tours foster genuine cultural exchanges, or 'living experiences', by closely involving tourists in village activities. These interactions serve as vehicles for learning the local way of life, beliefs and traditions.

The staff are experienced adventure travel specialists who ensure the quality of the programmes, three of which stand out for their sustainable tourism aspects. The 20-day 'Nature Lovers' package covers the entire country, taking in diverse activities such as bird watching, snorkeling and forest treks. An 11-day cycling tour through northern Vietnam provides an alternative entrance into remote villages on a journey that cuts across Sapa Valley, climbs Lai Chau and Sin Ho and overnights in remote villages.

Suspension bridge



Trekking River

Exotissimo also offers a multi-day trek through the Pu Luong Nature Reserve and the Mai Chau Valley just southwest of Hanoi. The excursion follows part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and travels along the Song Ma River. Trekkers stay in villagers' homes and a communal longhouse.

How it helps: Exotissimo's tours often stop at projects aimed at alleviating poverty and training local communities in tourism. Residents assist as guides and learn how to organise homestays, skills which lead to sustainable tourism activities. Exotissimo also works with locals to create awareness for the need to preserve their natural and cultural heritage, while showing them how tourism can increase their incomes.


Through the personal interactions fostered by Exotissimo, villagers develop pride in their culture while visitors get a true hands-on experience. Those travelling with Exotissimo also learn about the impact of tourism on the communities. Visitors often comment on how they walked away from villages with much more respect for the culture and people, and how these encounters will influence their approach to other ethnicities in the future. Exotissimo strives to maintain the socio-economic balance of the communities they visit. Small tour groups are the norm and prior to reaching their destinations the guides explain how to lessen the cultural impact of their stay. As part of this effort, Exotissimo distributes its guideline, *Responsible Travel, Make a Difference!* to all its clients, and recently published a more comprehensive version, *Exocares*.


Contact and booking information

Jean-Yves Paille, Véronique Ducassy
Exotissimo Travel

26 Tran Nhat Duat, Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (84 4) [0] 828 2150
E-mail: jeanyves@exotissimo.com,
veronique@exotissimo.com
Web: www.exotissimo.com

Into the Limestone Forest

 **Activity:** Exploring Pu Luong Nature Reserve.

 **Location:** The Pu Luong-Cuc Phuong limestone mountain range from Thanh Hoa through Hoa Binh to Cuc Phuong.

 **Tip:** Wear a broad-brimmed hat to protect against heatstroke while hiking.

Explore the wildlife, ethnic groups and dramatic landscapes amid remnant forests in northwest Vietnam.

The experience: A drive southwest of Hanoi delivers visitors to the only remaining expanse of lowland limestone forest in northern Vietnam, and provides close-up experiences with the Thai and Muong people. The Pu Luong - Cuc Phuong Landscape Conservation Project and its community-based management second phase, is a seven-year undertaking by Fauna & Flora International (FFI).

The limestone range extends from the Pu Luong Nature Reserve in Thanh Hoa province north to Cuc Phuong National Park. This eco-region supports the last populations of the endangered Delacour's Langur. Several threatened bird species have been spotted in the biodiversity zone. The area is also home to Asia's widest range of snail species as well as karst-dependant invertebrates and bats.

The Pu Luong Nature reserve



Pu Luong rice wine

Within the limestone walls of the Pu Luong Nature Reserve, tourists can visit three communes - Phu Le, Thanh Son and Lung Cao – in which the Thai and Muong ethnic groups offer homestays. Independent travellers can reach Pu Luong Nature Reserve by bus to Mai Chau, and then travel by motorbike or 4WD car to the entry gate, though walking to the reserve puts tourists in closer touch with the surrounding nature. Tours can also be booked through Exotissimo Travel.

How it helps: FFI's participation in the Pu Luong – Cuc Phuong project has improved local homestays in its three targeted Thanh Hoa communes, and meet the basic accommodation requirements of tourists who don't mind foregoing creature comforts. The project further trains local people in necessary skills for implementing ecotourism. FFI has also set up signboards to help guide tourists, and has developed an ecotourism map, which indicates trekking routes and locations.

Some villagers receive direct benefits from tourists by providing services such as food and accommodation. However, 25% of the revenue is contributed to the community fund, which is used to repair roads, provide security and organise other activities. The project also raises awareness in the villages of the value of their culture and the limestone landscape they live in. This has led to a reduction in hunting and logging while ecotourism is on the rise.

Contact and booking information


Pu Luong Nature Reserve, Lam Sa Commune,
Ba Thuc District, Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 3.880 671
E-mail: mark.infield@fauna-flora.org
Web: www.fauna-flora.org

For organised tours, contact:
Exotissimo Travel
26 Tran Nhat Duat, Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 4 828 2150
E-mail: infohanoi@exotissimo.com
Web: www.exotissimo.com

Go Up to Get Dao

 **Activity:** Taphin Village – Footprint Vietnam.

 **Location:** Sapa, Lao Cai.

 **Tip:** Make the effort to learn some unique Dao words while in Taphin.

Visit the proud Dao minority, work with them in the fields and avoid the Sapa crowds.

The experience: Footprint Vietnam Travel has taken the Sapa tourism boom the next step and offers a total ‘village experience’ in Taphin, home of a Community Based Tourism (CBT) project established by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in 2002.

Footprint Vietnam leads small, low-impact groups on a traditional trek and homestay to Taphin, but veers away from the camera-lens view of the resident Dao people. The main attraction is a shared experience among the hosts, visitors and the tour guide, during which everyone engages in a cultural exchange. The Dao ethnic minority are extremely proud of their culture and traditions, and sharing their lifestyle is an integral and active part of all visits. Tourists are encouraged to wake early to work with the locals in the fields, and the children are constantly teaching visitors Dao words. Footprint’s always chat with the elders to learn something new for future tours.

Taphin Terrace



Dao Lady

How it helps: Taphin Village was selected for funding by CIDA as a CBT project to reduce poverty. During the five-year programme, villagers have taken part in capacity-building training in homestay development, food safety, first aid and English.

Footprint Vietnam has been working with CIDA and Taphin Village leaders to create a tourism product that adheres to the notion of responsible travel. Great care has been placed in equally sharing the economic benefits of the CBT project. A rotation plan has been implemented in which home stays and meals are provided by families on an alternating basis.

Footprint Vietnam plays a role in a CBT project in the Quan Ba District of Ha Giang, which is partially funded by Caritas, to build sustainable livelihoods for the poorest people and the poorest communities. Footprint Vietnam is also a sponsor for KOTO, Cat Ba National Parks, Cuc Phuong Rescue Centre and the Sapa and Ha Giang Community Funds.

All of Footprint Vietnam’s tour guides have been trained in sustainable tourism at the Hanoi Open University, and are highly committed to protect and promote the importance the environment and cultural diversity. Footprint continually embraces grassroots CBT and has plans to become involved in more community efforts.


Location and booking information


Dang Xuan Son
Footprint Vietnam

6 Le Thanh Tong, Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 4 933 2844
Fax: (+84) [0] 4 933 2855
E-mail: footprint@hn.vnn.vn
Web: www.footprint.vn

Comfortably Responsible

 **Activity:** Victoria Hotels & Resorts.

 **Location:** Sapa – Hoi An – Phan Thiet – Can Tho – Chau Doc.

 **Tip:** Advanced booking essential, especially in peak demand periods.

Stay in comfortable surroundings around the country without compromising your access to socially constructive tourism experiences

The experience: Rather than plant its properties in the impersonal surroundings of urban centres, Victoria Hotels & Resorts decided to establish itself in more far-flung regions, allowing travellers to discover unspoiled, natural beauty while enjoying comfortable accommodation.

Victoria currently has five properties throughout Vietnam, each designed to reflect the local culture. The hotels blend French colonial architecture and subtle luxuries with natural surroundings and indigenous handicrafts. The interiors reflect local influence while giving guests a home-like atmosphere in some of the country's more remote areas. Individual hotels provide a distinct atmosphere with accompanying activities to present an authentic base from which to explore the locale and meet its people. The company's first property, Victoria Phan Thiet Beach Resort & Spa, opened in 1997 on the South China Sea some 200 km north of Ho Chi Minh City. The following year, Victoria Sapa Resort began welcoming guests in the Hoang

Phan Thiet Beach Resort



Victoria traditional conical hat making

Lien Mountains near the Chinese border. The Mekong Delta is home to the Victoria Can Tho Resort and the Victoria Chau Doc Hotel near the Cambodian border. The most recent addition, the Victoria Hoi An Beach Resort & Spa, opened in 2001.

How it helps: Victoria Hotels & Resorts is an international chain that strongly believes in providing residents in host communities with international hotel management skills through training that leads to a career path in the hospitality industry. Each hotel largely depends on the locals for staffing its ranks, and this is not limited to hourly wage earners and mid-level management, but for senior executive positions as well.

Each year, all Victoria hotels organise a Green Day during which the management teams lead local volunteers in cleaning up the surrounding areas. This activity provides an excellent opportunity for hotel staff to socialise with members of communities in which they work.

Victoria Hotels arrange local tour programmes such as visits and homestays at local villages. The aim of these activities is to provide guests with a more realistic experience and deeper insight into the local lifestyle, culture and customs. Each hotel also presents cultural performances during dinner and displays local ethnic handicrafts at the lobby areas.




Contact and booking information

Victoria Hotels & Resorts Head Office
101 Tran Hung Dao, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 8 837 3031
Fax: (+84) [0] 8 836 4108
E-mail: reservation@victoriahotels-asia.com
Web: www.victoriahotels-asia.com

Overseas sales representatives

Victoria Hotels & Resorts Paris Sales Office
E-mail: eric.flat@victoriahotels-asia.com
Victoria Hotels & Resorts UK Sales Office
E-mail: sales.uk@victoriahotels-asia.com

A Sapa Escape

-  **Activity:** Topas Adventure Vietnam.
-  **Location:** Hanoi and Sapa.
-  **Tip:** Mt Fanispan requires good fitness.

Visit remote locations and villages in the Sapa area with a company with a lot of experience and understanding.

The experience: Topas Adventure Vietnam was among the first tour operators on the path to Sapa, making its foray in 1999, long before the destination became a major stop on the tourism trail. Topas is now a front-running adventure travel company in the northern mountainous region and has a deep knowledge of the area.

Topas leads hiking and mountain bike excursions into the Sapa countryside as well as strenuous climbs to the summit of Mt Fanispan. It offers half-day treks and multi-day journeys that traverse remote landscapes and villages. The Topas expeditions veer away from the well-known paths to hidden trails heading to far-flung areas with spectacular vistas. Topas' full-time experienced guides provide educational information on the environment and the ethnic minorities that visitors see and meet along the way.

Remote lanscape



Tourists helping making the road

Safety is their utmost concern, as is the food. Cooks on the tours use hygienic methods and the freshest local and wild ingredients, most purchased from people and villages on the route.

How it helps: Topas Adventure Vietnam displays its commitment to responsible and sustainable tourism by integrating environmental and socio-economic principles in its company policies, and requests its suppliers and sub-contractors abide by the same codes.

To ensure minimal environmental impact on its tours, groups are limited in size, and permission from local authorities is always sought before entering environmentally sensitive areas. On overnight camping tours, trees are never cut down for firewood, a single large jug of water is used for the entire group rather than bringing plastic bottles. Waste is collected for proper disposal at the end of the journey. Socio-economic benefits aim to preserve the culture and show respect for the people's lifestyles in the communities that Topas visits. The porter teams and guides are recruited from the Black Hmong from the Y Linh Ho village near Sapa. Traditionally they are farmers or hunters and have proved to be ideal helpers and companions in the mountains. Topas turns trips into authentic experiences by promoting interaction with the hosts. The company encourages visitors to try the dishes the locals take pride in serving and explaining. Topas takes tourists to small guest houses and homestays in the poor areas they visit.

Location and booking information

Peter Michaelsen, Topas Adventure Vietnam
24 Muong Hoa, Sa Pa District, Lao Cai Province

Hanoi office
52 To Ngoc Van Street, Tay Ho District, Hanoi Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 4 715 1005
Fax: (+84) [0] 4 715 1007
E-mail: info@topas-adventure-vietnam.com
Web: www.topas-adventure-vietnam.com

Peak Rooms with a View

 **Activity:** Topas Eco Lodge.

 **Location:** Thanh Kim Commune, 18 km southeast of Sapa.

 **Tip:** It gets very cold at night.



Room's interior

Retreat to a comfortable mountainside commune with stunning views and a commitment to responsible, low-impact principles.

The experience: Topas Eco Lodge commands an ideal location atop a pair of cone-shaped peaks deep in northern Vietnam's Sapa region. The lodge, which began welcoming guests in 2003, houses 25 cottages constructed in a circle around the summit. Each opens to a balcony with views of an endless mountain landscape dotted with picturesque valleys housing minority villages of the Tay and Red Dao ethnic groups.

All Topas Eco Lodge accommodations are double or twin rooms equipped with toilets and shower facilities. A restaurant and a reception area can accommodate 50 guests, and the Thai stilt-house restaurant offers three daily buffets. Guests at Topas Eco Lodge can relax in the quiet and remote natural surroundings or join in more active pursuits such as trekking to nearby villages, hiking through the lush forest and exploring the hillsides on a mountain bike.

Remote lanscape



How it helps: Topas Eco Lodge's design is based on ecological principles, and uses solar technology to power all its lodges and an alternative sustainable supply of water that also reduces consumption. A wastewater facility avoids polluting the area and ensures the lodge does not harm the environment.

The lodge was built by local contractors and skilled residents, and during its construction, they used traditional techniques and materials whenever possible. This was combined with modern supplies and expertise when necessary to guarantee a practical level of durability and comfort. The ultimate goal was to create structures that blended with local physical and cultural environment through careful attention to form, landscaping and colour, as well as the use of local traditional architecture. During the construction phase emphasis was placed on minimising the impact on the surrounding nature.

Topas Eco Lodge also makes a great effort to conserve the area's flora and fauna, and offers educational programmes to its employees and tourists about the biodiversity and culture in the Sapa region. The lodge works with the local village, and contributes to sustainable community development through education programmes and research. Topas Eco Lodge also provides inhabitants with year-round jobs and uses local products and goods to deliver economic benefits to the residents.

Location and booking information


Topas Eco Lodge
 Peter Michaelsen, Managing Director
 24 Muong Hoa, Sa Pa Dist, Lao Cai Province
 Tel: (+84) [0] 4 715 1005
 Fax: (+84) [0] 4 715 1007
 Email: info@topas-eco-lodge.com
 Web: www.topas-eco-lodge.com

From Thanh Kim Commune, 18 km southeast of Sapa, the Lodge offers three free shuttle buses a day.

On the Trail of the Gecko

 **Activity:** Gecko Travel.

 **Location:** Throughout Vietnam.

 **Tip:** Gecko founder, former guide book researcher Mark Ord, still leads most of the trips to Vietnam.



A closer look

Discover Vietnam with a British-Thai company that uses local transport, prefers working with “friends” rather than “business contacts”, and is passionate about its commitment to responsible travel.

The experience: Gecko Travel offers well-rounded excursions catering to singles, couples, families, and anyone of any age with a sense of adventure and wants a closer look into Vietnam’s diverse cultural, historical and natural nooks and crannies. Gecko steers its groups – no larger than nine – away from the traditional package-deal trails and towards genuine interactions with the local people.

Founded as a UK company in 1999 by guidebook author Mark Ord and his sister Lesley Schofield, Gecko now has a Southeast Asia office for those already on the ground and seeking an original itinerary carved out by the veteran regional traveller. The tours balance must-see attractions with little known secrets, and remain true to Gecko’s philosophy of leaving a positive impact and showing respect for the residents and the environment. Tourists hunting for a thorough introduction to Vietnam will find Gecko’s three-week journey from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City an ideal mix. Halong Bay, Hue and Hoi An are on the heritage site agenda, while Vietnam’s natural side is explored in remote Yok Don and Nam Cat Tien national parks.

In Halong Bay



Accommodation ranges from homestays in a Montanard village and lodging with a Mekong Delta island family to a resort on Nha Trang’s Whale Island.

How it helps: Gecko Travel takes great care to ensure they not only provide exciting and memorable holidays, but that the business makes a positive contribution to the country as well. Gecko groups tend to overnight in smaller, family-run accommodation, eat in local restaurants and use local-style transport. Where available, tours incorporate ecoresorts and community-based ecotourism projects. Gecko published a Responsible Tourism Mission Statement in 2003, available on its website, in which it outlines its position on contributing to local economies and on environmental and social awareness. Gecko only uses local guides with proper credentials. Many activities take place in high-poverty areas, where Gecko ensures the entire community benefits from the visit. Gecko also lends financial assistance to the villages on its tours, and educates residents on environmental preservation. Tourists are given a variety of informative materials to assist them in maintaining the local environment as well as displaying cultural sensitivity. Biodegradable materials such as banana or cassava leaves are used to package food for the journeys, as are eco-friendly soaps for bathing in streams. Prior to starting the trip, Gecko gives its passengers an orientation regarding aspects of culture, dress, general behaviour and local ways of eating.

Contact and booking information

Gecko Travel
47/1 Nimmanhem Road, Soi 9
Suthep, Chiang Mai, Thailand 50000
Tel: (+66) [0] 1 885 9490
Fax: (+66) [0] 53 894 158
E-mail: gt-thailand@geckotravel.com
Web: www.geckotravel.com


Read Gecko’s “Statement for Endeavour for Responsible Travel” at <http://www.geckotravel.com/endeavour.php>



A Lowland Sanctuary

 **Activity:** Yokdon Park Ecotourism and Environmental Education Centre.

 **Location:** Dak Lak province, lower central Vietnam.

 **Tip:** The best time to visit is the start of dry season between November and February or the beginning of the rainy season in May.



Yokdon villager

Explore Yokdon, the only low-lying rainforest national park in Vietnam. The park holds the largest variety of flora and fauna of any reserve in the country.

The experience: Yokdon is Vietnam's largest national park, covering 1,155 km² of relatively flat land with two small mountains on the southern bank of the Srepok River in Dak Lak province. The Central Highlands nature preserve was established in 1991 to protect the forest home of 464 species of flora and scores of mammal, reptile, bird, and fish species including 17 listed as endangered.

The Yokdon Ecotourism and Environmental Education Centre offers a variety of services and one-to-five-day tours for visitors wishing to navigate the park's many trails. Overnight stays can be arranged at an ethnic minority village of which there are 12 in Yokdon's buffer zone.

Yokdon provides six distinct ecotourism activities. Visitors can cruise the Srepok River in a traditional wooden boat or cycle deeper into the park to take in its biodiversity. Elephant rides are available in the day to enjoy viewing orchids and *Michelia* as well as a selection of precious tropical woods, while evening elephant treks search for wildlife.

Yokdon Lak Lake



The more adventurous can camp out in the park or climb Yokdon's mountains. Those interested in the area's culture can watch locals make handicrafts, stay in a village longhouse, join in a gong festival, try local dishes such as lam rice with roasted chicken and even sample the local rice wine from a ceramic jug.

How it helps: Yokdon was founded to protect a rare patch of lowland dipterocarp forest. It is the only national park in Vietnam conserving this particular forest type.

Yokdon preserves more species of endangered birds and animals than any other park in the country. Of the 56 precious animal species in Indochina, Yokdon is home to 38, including elephants, wild bulls, gayals, sambar deer, peacocks and water varans. The national park is an important site for the conservation of large mammals, particularly gaur, banteng and the blackshanked douc langur.

Yokdon is also regarded as a significant bird conservation area and home to 196 species including the rare green peafowl, giant ibis and Mekong wagtail. Yokdon also protects 46 reptile, 15 fresh water fish and thousands of insect species.


Contact and booking information

Yokdon National Park
 Nguyen Son Hung
 Buon Don District, Dak Lak Province, Vietnam
 (40 km from Buon Ma Thuot City)
 Tel / Fax: (+84) [0] 578 3049
 E-mail: yokdonecotourism@vnn.vn

A Labour of Family Love

 **Activity:** Vietnam Quilts.

 **Location:** Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

 **Tip:** Take a magazine or some pictures along if you'd like a made-to-order quilt.



Working in group

By purchasing a handmade cotton quilt you help support rural Vietnamese women. Regular income from quilting allows them to stay in their village with their children and dependents.

The experience: French NGO, Vietnam Plus, has turned quilting circles into a way to employ groups of rural Vietnamese women while putting the profits directly back in their communities. Though visitors to Vietnam Quilts' two shops in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi may only see the high-quality end products, they know the price tag is providing jobs and putting children through school.

Truong Thi Diem Thanh founded Vietnam Quilts in 2001, and began employing women from Mekong Delta villages to stitch together quilts and accessories for sale in HCM City. They work in groups under leaders, who train new members and guarantee the quality of the products and their timely delivery. The shops offer a wide range of ready-made quilts in designs from traditional patchwork to more contemporary patterns. Quilts with distinct Asian motifs are available, as are more colourful designs for kids. Vietnam Quilts' line up of accessories includes table settings, aprons, pillow cases and sheets.

Handmade cotton quilt



Shoppers at Vietnam Quilts will find a choice of designs for purchase. A catalogue is on hand showing a larger selection that can be ready within weeks, and custom orders are also taken for delivery in a bit more than a month. Visitors to the outlets can also browse the display of photographs showing the women taking sheets of 100 percent cotton through the entire process of creating a quilt.

How it helps: Vietnam Quilts provides a regular income to women in rural Vietnam, enabling them to remain in their communities and care for their children. The quilters receive a fair income, employment benefits, training and a safe and comfortable work environment.

The greater community also benefits from the project. In 2006 Vietnam Quilts turned a profit for the first time. This US\$24,000 was used by Vietnam Plus to provide 500 scholarships to children, set up health education programmes in the communities, build toilet facilities and distribute over 1,000 mosquito nets.

The success of the Vietnam Quilts project led to the opening of its second retail shop in Hanoi in 2007. The aim of the new shop is to meet the demand of women asking to join, and within its first few months, a new group of 15 women was formed.

Location and contact information

Vietnam Quilts
Sue Wise
Ho Chi Minh City
68 Ngo Duc Ke, D1, HCMC, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 8829 8794
E-mail: vietnam-quilts@hcm.fpt.vn

Hanoi
16 Hang Tre, Hoan Kiem, Hanoi.
Tel: (+84) [0] 4926 3682
Email: vietnam-quilts@vnn.vn
Open Monday-Saturday 0900-1800
Web: www.vietnam-quilts.org

Sea It For Yourself

 **Activity:** National Oceanographic Museum.

 **Location:** On the coast of Nha Trang Bay, 5 km south of Nha Trang City.

 **Tip:** It gets crowded at weekends and public holidays.



Label Photo

Visit the National Oceanographic Museum to experience the variety of Vietnam's marine life and learn how the Vietnamese have interacted with the sea for hundreds of years.

The experience: Nha Trang's National Oceanographic Museum showcases a marine collection of over 10,000 species gathered since the museum opened in 1922. You can explore themed rooms dedicated to various aspects of ocean life, from traditional Vietnamese fishing techniques to the life of sea turtles.

Many of the themes focus on marine science including the history of its technology and research equipment. 'From Light to Life' introduces phytoplankton and the harmful algae that cause red tide. 'Life in a Drop of Water' takes a microscopic look at aquatic organisms. For the less biologically minded, 'Coastal Natural Disasters' teaches about devastating meteorological phenomena such as hurricanes, monsoons and tsunamis. Other theme rooms place the spotlight on the sacred legends, culture and traditions of Vietnam's fishing communities.

Label photo



Vietnam's marine biodiversity can also be found in the museum's aquariums. Black tip reef, leopard and ray sharks all ply the museum's waters, as do sea anemone, clown fish and sea horses. Less lively are the invaluable research specimens on exhibition, with the skeleton of a centuries old humpback whale as the star attraction. Guides are also on hand to better explain the marine life on display.

How it helps: By exhibiting and teaching about the culture, traditions and activities of fishing communities, along with the history of marine science and research in Vietnam, the National Oceanographic Museum keeps the country's natural and cultural sea heritage alive.

Of the 300,000 visitors entering the museum each year, about 10% are university students and school children. The museum offers them free organised, in-depth lessons in the theme rooms. Community education is another social component of the museum. It aims to raise the public's knowledge and awareness through the guidance of the staff.

All visitors can learn about Vietnam's marine life and its diversity along with environmentally related issues such as pollution and ecosystem degradation. The museum's showrooms point to the need for protecting threatened marine species such as turtles and dugong,

Location and contact information

National Oceanographic Museum
Institute of Oceanography

Dr. Bui Hong Long, Director
01 Cau Da, Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa, Vietnam

Tel: (+84) [0] 5859 0036


Fax: (+84) [0] 5859 0034

E-mail: haiduong@dng.vnn.vn, bhlong@dng.vnn.vn

Web: www.vnio.org.vn

Wildlife in Safe Hands

 **Activity:** Wildlife Rescue Centre.

 **Location:** 90 minutes from Ho Chi Minh City, close to the Cu Chi Tunnels.

 **Tip:** Never buy animal based 'traditional' medicines or souvenirs.



Label Photo

See rehabilitating animal species, many of them rare, that have been rescued from unscrupulous humans.

The experience: Visitors wanting a closer look into the efforts to save Vietnam's protected animals from illegal traders can go to WAR just outside Ho Chi Minh City. WAR's (Wildlife At Risk) Cu Chi Wildlife Rescue Centre harbours animals confiscated by the Forest Protection Department (FPD) and local authorities, and it treats them at southern Vietnam's only multi-species wildlife hospital.

WAR began combating the illegal wildlife trade in 2003. The rescue centre opened in 2006, and it now provides the public with tours of its less sensitive areas to see the animals it has saved. The list of wildlife refugees includes sun bears, primates, monitor lizards, water dragons, pythons and a variety of turtle species. In 2007, WAR took another step in its goal to raise environmental consciousness and promote the conservation of endangered species and their habitats by launching its Awareness Centre.

Label photo

This new structure presents educational displays and information about Vietnam's biodiversity, the threats posed by illegal wildlife trade and the role the rescue centre plays in helping the FPD to enforce the law. Visitors can learn about the country's natural heritage and the plight of its beleaguered wildlife, and are encouraged to take an active role in preserving them.

How it helps: The WAR rescue centre and new awareness wing aim to help change traditional attitudes towards Vietnam's wildlife and environment and encourage the public to view them as important long-term national assets worth conserving rather than disposable commodities.

WAR utilises the Cu Chi Rescue Centre as a vital weapon in its fight against illegal trafficking in wildlife trade. The centre's main purpose is to aid FPD staff by providing them with accommodation and caring for the animals they confiscate from illegal traders.

The rescue centre directly protects Vietnam's biodiversity and natural heritage and is co-managed by the local FPD. It employs local staff to operate the facility as well as to conduct tours. The awareness centre highlights the threats to wildlife posed by local cultural traditions such as traditional Chinese medicine and consuming endangered animals for alleged health benefits.

Location and contact information

Cu Chi Wildlife Rescue Centre

Hoa Nguyen, Director and Rescue Centre Manager

8/9 Dinh Tien Hoang, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Tel: (+84) [0] 8 910 6126


E-mail: info@wildlifeatrisk.org


Web: www.wildlifeatrisk.org



Three Realms of the Senses

 **Activity:** Six Senses Resorts & Spas.

 **Location:** Nha Trang (two locations) and Dalat.

 **Tip:** Pre-booking is essential, especially during public holidays.



Sixsenses Nhatrang hideaway water villa

Stay at three resorts that offer luxury delivered according to the principles of social and environmental sustainability.

The experience: Six Senses is recognised as a successful prototype for socially and environmentally responsible five-star resorts. The company operates three properties in Vietnam. The oldest, the Evason Ana Mandara, opened on Nha Trang's beach in 1997, and is set in a sprawling tropical garden overlooking the sea. The resort's simple design and native wood and rattan furnishings mirror the image of a yesteryear village, while the peaceful atmosphere and ocean views are accentuated by the warm hospitality of the staff. Nearby in Nha Trang's Ninh Van Bay is Six Senses' boutique-style Evason Hideaway at Ana Mandara. Accessible only by boat, the resort is set amongst rock formations, coral reefs and white sandy beaches with a mountain backdrop. Many of the beachfront villas incorporate surrounding shoreline boulders into their design, placing the accommodation right on the water. Perched on a 35-acre hilltop in the pine forests of the Central Highlands is Six Senses' Evason Ana Mandara Villas & Spa at Dalat. Among its 57 guest accommodations at the 100-year-old cool summer retreat are 15 fully restored French colonial villas originally constructed in the 1920s and 1930s in the high-society 'Bellevue Quarter'. All areas of the resort on the gently sloping hillside offer striking views of the surrounding town, countryside and vegetable fields.

Sixsenses Nhatrang suite



How it helps: Six Senses Social and Environment Sustainability Policy commits the company to sustainable development and ecological responsibility through a strategy followed from a property's inception through its opening and into its daily operation. The environmental/geographical risk, energy management, water supply and waste water management are addressed in the design stage and implemented during construction. Six Senses Benchmarking encompasses a quantitative process, developed in accordance with Green Globe criteria, in which environmental performance can be measured through key performance indicators that compare a property's performance against the industry and competitor's standards. Six Senses Spa was chosen by the Green Globe to be the benchmark for international spa operations. Following the company's Social & Environmental Responsibility Fund, all resorts contribute approximately 0.5 % of their total revenues to social and environmental efforts, mostly activities, projects and initiatives aimed at sustainable development. Further, 99% of the resorts' staff, or "hosts", are locals, including those at the management level.

Locations and booking information

Six Senses Resorts & Spas
Beachside Tran Phu Blvd., Nha Trang, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 58 526892; Fax: (+84) [0] 58 524701
E-mail: dothu@sixsenses.com
Web: www.sixsenses.com

Evason Ana Mandara & Six Senses Spa at Nha Trang
Beachside Tran Phu Blvd., Nha Trang, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 58 522 222; Fax: (+84) [0] 58 525828
Web: www.sixsenses.com/evason-anamandara/index.php

Evason Hideaway & Six Senses Spa at Ana Mandara
Ninh Van Bay, Ninh Hoa, Khanh Hoa, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 58 728222; Fax: (+84) [0] 58 728223
Web: www.sixsenses.com/evason-anamandara/index.php

Evason Ana Mandara Villas & Six Senses Spa at Dalat
Le Lai Street, Ward 5, Dalat City, Lam Dong Province, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 63 555888; Fax: (+84) [0] 63 555666
Web: www.sixsenses.com/evason-dalat/index.php

From Mountain to Mangrove

 Activity: HG Travel.

 Location: Hanoi and throughout Vietnam.

 Tip: Mt Fansipan experiences winter snow flurries.

Discover Vietnam, especially its wilderness areas, with a people-first tour operator that plants mangrove trees and distributes school books to needy children.

The experience: HG Travel has been providing visitors to Vietnam with package tour programmes since 1991. The company specialises in cultural, heritage and eco-adventure expeditions throughout Vietnam and contributes to community-based projects in many of the destinations they visit.

In the northwest, HG guides those with plenty of energy and endurance to the top of the 3,143-metre Mt Fansipan, Vietnam's tallest mountain. Just nine km from Sapa town, the peak takes three days to reach and descend, and is accessible to almost anyone who is in reasonable shape and has plenty of endurance and energy. The terrain is rugged and the weather is often wet and cold, and with no villages along the way, climbers must camp out. However, with the assistance of porters to carry the food and equipment, hikers can focus on the natural surroundings and spectacular panorama when finally reaching the top. In Trung Nguyen (the Central Highlands), HG leads tourists on a three-day nature and cultural trek from Pleiku city through vast forest areas, past waterfalls and along rivers, and includes an overnight stay at an ethnic minority village.

Travel Mekong



Caligraphy

Farther south, a three-day soft adventure in the Mekong Delta starts by exploring Vinh Long province's Caibe Market and fruit plantations. After an evening in Can Tho, a boat ride visits Cai Rang Floating Market followed by a climb up Sam Mountain for a vista of Cambodia. A night in Chau Doc precedes a pleasant boat trip that opens the door to delta life before sailing to Sa Dec.

How it helps: HG Travel views itself as a "people business", focussing much of its efforts on the people and communities they visit. The company actively assists in development projects, works with residents and local guides in remote areas and supports the personnel at all of their destinations. HG actively promotes awareness in protecting the natural environment by cleaning areas around Halong Bay and the Mekong Delta and planting in the Can Gio Mangrove Forest. They provide professional training for young local executives in Halong, Hai Phong, Cat Ba and Hue, have funded the renovation of a school for the disadvantaged in Hoa Binh province and established a programme to distribute books and school supplies for children in Yen Bai Province.

Location and booking information

HG Travel
Mr. Tran Van Thuy
99 Ba Trieu, Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 47 333333
Fax: (+84) [0] 47 333337
E-mail: thuy.tv@hgtravel.com
Web: www.hgtravel.com




Europe
Mr. Patrick Crepin
Avenue D'Aulne, 15 BP11, B 1180 Brussels, Belgium
Tel/Fax: (+32) [0] 23322 500
E-mail: europa@hgtravel.com

North America
2 Lombard Street, Suite 300, Toronto, ON M5C 1M1, Canada
Tel: (+1) [0] 705 725 1415
Fax: (+1) [0] 416 352 5646
E-mail: north.america@hgtravel.com



A Guide to Responsible Tourism

Do the Delta in Style

-  **Activity:** Mekong Horizon sampan trips.
-  **Location:** Cai Be's Phu An Hamlet in the Mekong Delta.
-  **Tip:** Bring binoculars for mangrove bird and wildlife spotting.



Horizon Cai Be Princess

Discover quiet corners of the Mekong delta in comfortable sampans that sail in the opposite direction of mass tourism.

The experience: Established in 2005 by Nguyen Nhu Ngoc, wife of the CEO of one of Southeast Asia's leading tour operators, Mekong Horizon operates cruises away from mass tourist destinations in the Mekong Delta on board self-designed locally-built sampans. The fleet includes the Cai Be Princess designed for individuals and 30-person groups, the 45-passenger Mekong Princess and the cosier Song Xanh with berths for 10 passengers for overnight cruises.

Located in Phu An, a two-hour drive south of Ho Chi Minh City, Mekong Horizon organises cruises to Vinh Long, Sa Dec, Can Tho, Long Xuyen, Chau Doc, as well as more remote areas, giving tourists the opportunity to have cross-cultural exchanges with rural residents. The voyages reach into the most naturally attractive and culturally rich corners of the Delta and include cycling to visit villages to experience their culture and traditions.

In 2006, Mekong Horizon constructed the Indochinese-style Le Longanier restaurant/villa for 200 persons at their base in Phu An.

Horizon Le Longanier



The two-storey eatery is located in a former fruit orchard on the Phu An river, and the company's cruise programmes always include a stop there for lunch. Mekong Horizon began construction of a 15-20 room boutique resort in Phu An in 2007, and plans to start up a handicraft production project involving locals.

How it helps: Mekong Horizon decided to establish the company in a very remote area, where locals have no knowledge about the hospitality and services industry. Today they employ 35 staff including boat crew and restaurant employees, all of whom are from small hamlets or villages located near Phu An. Mekong Horizon has also embarked on a training programme aimed at educating locals in the skills required for the hospitality and tourism business. The courses focus on having a service mind and service attitude, learning foreign languages, and understanding foreigners' expectations regarding the level of service standards. The company has plans to train and support residents in developing their skills as artisans and to promote activities to bring in extra income by selling the crafts to visiting tourists. Further, at all destinations where Mekong Horizons operate, they encourage locals and tourists to respect the environment.

Location and booking information

Horizon Travel Co., Ltd
 Mrs Nhu Ngoc Nguyen, CEO
 49 Hamlet 5, Phu An Village, Cai Lay Dist., Tien Giang,
 Mekong Delta, Vietnam
 Tel: (+84) [0] 73 924658
 Fax: (+84) [0] 58 590034
 E-mail: mekonghorizon@yahoo.com

Thailand
 184/28 Forum Tower, Rachadaphisek Road, Huaykwang
 10310 Bangkok
 Tel: (+66) [0] 2 645 2740/41
 Fax: (+66) [0] 2 645 2742
 E-mail: asiatrav@samart.co.th

A Flair for Food

 **Activity:** Hoa Sua café and patisserie outlets.

 **Location:** Hanoi and Sapa Town.

 **Tip:** Some of the staff are hearing-impaired.

A culinary school trains disadvantaged youths to make and serve delicious European and Asian dishes with French flair.

The experience: Opening its doors in 1994, Hoa Sua is the first vocational school in Vietnam with the objective of providing disadvantaged youth with training and job placement, mostly in the hospitality and restaurant professions. During its 13 years, the school has secured livelihoods for over 3,000 students, and the programmes are constantly improved to meet regional and international standards. To finance their training efforts and give students the opportunity to acquire professional experience, Hoa Sua has opened several eateries and other enterprises in Hanoi and Sapa Town. As the school has received much of its support in techniques and methodology from French, Belgian and Luxembourg partners, the menus feature baked goods and patisserie along with European and Asian dishes. Hoa Sua's training restaurant is located on Hanoi's Han Hoi Street. It is open daily for lunch and dinner, features a weekend breakfast and offers free wi-fi. Just across the street sits Croissant, the school's French bakery and its adjoining embroidery and tailoring shop featuring the Chef Collection. Hoa Sua also operates Baguette & Chocolat restaurant/café/French bakery on Cha Ca Street and Café Smile on Van Mieu. Hoa Sua manages a second Baguette & Chocolat along with a small hotel in Sapa Town. Each outlet offers visitors high-quality service and the chance to contribute to reducing poverty in Vietnam.

Hoa Sua Bakery pastry class



HoaSuaHa Hoi restaurant

How it helps: The Hoa Sua school in Linh Nam, Hanoi, aims to fight poverty by training young people, especially disadvantaged and disabled youth, and placing them in jobs. The curriculum currently focuses baking and patisserie, European and Asian cooking, restaurant service, housekeeping, sewing and embroidery. Every year the school recruits 400 young people aged between 16 and 25 who live in extremely difficult circumstances. Most are orphans, street kids, children of war invalids and extremely poor families, ethnic minority youth and hearing-impaired children. The school's impact is not limited to the Hanoi area, but extends to all parts of Vietnam giving a great diversity of disadvantaged young people the opportunity to learn at Hoa Sua. This is arranged through mutual training agreements between Hoa Sua and local authorities. The targeted youth are sent to the Hoa Sua school in Hanoi for training and returned to their hometown for job placement and to contribute their know-how to their area's economic development.

Location and contact information

Hoa Sua School
Madame Pham Thi Vy, School Director
28A Ha Hoi, Hoan Kiem, Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 49 42 44 48 ; Fax: (+84) [0] 48 22 34 99
E-mail: hoasuaschool@fpt.vn
Web: www.hoasuaschool.com

Outlets

Hoa Sua training restaurant
28A Han Hoi Street, Hanoi
Open daily: 1100-2000 - Weekend breakfast: 0730-1130

Croissant French Bakery
21 Han Hoi Street, Hanoi - Open daily: 0700-2100


Embroidery, Sewing and Tailoring Shop
21D Han Hoi Street, Hanoi - Open Monday-Saturday:
0800-1900

Baguette & Chocolat
11B Cha Ca Street, Hanoi- Open daily: 0700-2200

Café Smile
5 Van Mieu Street, Hanoi - Open daily: 0700-2200.

Baguette & Chocolat and Mini-hotel
Thac Bac Street, Sapa Town- Open daily: 0700-2130

Minority Cultures

-  **Activity:** Tokyo Trading & Tourist.
 **Location:** A Luoi and Nam Dong Districts in Thua Thien Hue province.
 **Tip:** Purchase Catu brocade as it is very rare.

Take a deep forest trip with a company that has secured permission to visit remote ethnic villages and remnant war areas in Thua Thien Hue province.

The experience: Tokyo Trading & Tourist has been operating trekking and village tours in central Vietnam's Thua Thien Hue Province since 1996, and continues to dedicate its efforts solely in this region. Since its inception, the company has strived to improve the lives of the ethnic minorities – the Ta Oi, Ca Tu, Van Kieu and Pako – residing in the province's western jungle districts of A Luoi and Nam Dong. Because of its social commitment, Tokyo has received permission to host two special tours to remote villages in these areas.

The A Luoi War Vestiges Tour ventures to the Ho Chi Minh Trail along the Lao border and scene of fierce Vietnam War battles, bombings, napalm attacks and the use of Agent Orange. Stops at villages introduce visitors to residents who continue to carry the scars of the war including children who physically suffer in its aftermath. The tour treks up infamous Hamburger Hill (Bia Hill) while listening to an old soldier tell the battle's story. Visitors are also welcomed to a Taioi commune to meet the people and enjoy their traditional music and dance.

NamDong Welcome



Namdong Dance

The Nam Dong Minority Tour also heads to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and an exclusive visit to a Catu commune, where even the most intrepid backpacker has yet to venture. This village stay kicks off with a welcome ceremony and introduction to the distinct Catu culture. Visitors learn how to perform traditional dances, watch the local women weave brocades, trek through the jungle and overnight in a god house. During certain times of the year, buffalo sacrifices are performed.

How it helps: All Tokyo tours to minority villages reserve a fixed percentage of the fee to give the communes, which is generally earmarked for efforts to conserve traditional cultural activities such as playing musical instruments, producing handicrafts and performing rituals. This is especially significant as though the older people carry on these traditions, the younger generation is losing them and the community fears their culture will become diluted. By paying for these performances, visitors are ensured the youngsters will be trained and carry on the culture. The Catu's distinct brocade is also an endangered art form as they have no way to sell them in commercial centres. By purchasing these items, visitors can help keep this handicraft alive while financially benefiting the commune.


Location and booking information

Tokyo Trading & Tourist
 Mr Truong Dinh Lam, Director
 34. Tran Cao Van St, Hue city, Vietnam
 Tel: (+84) [0] 54 821467
 Fax: (+84) [0] 54 821466
 E-mail: dongkinh@dng.vnn.vn

Hands-on Experience

 **Activity:** Pacific Discovery tours.

 **Location:** Throughout Vietnam.

 **Tip:** If you want to see Vietnam through a tour bus window, these tours are not for you

This New Zealand operator keeps group sizes small, uses local transport and keeps group sizes to under 12.

The experience: After years of working for tour companies, Scott Burnett and Rachel Sanson envisioned a way to operate tours that ensured a better outcome for communities that tour groups visited and a lower impact on the environment. They established Pacific Discovery in 2001. The company has extensive experience developing international programmes with schools and universities in the United States and New Zealand to provide customised travel/study programmes to Vietnam that focus on sustainable tourism development.

Pacific Discovery offers small group, educational and volunteer tours. They blend ecotourism, cultural immersion such as threshing rice and adventures like climbing Mt Fansipan. Pacific Discovery tours have set annual departures, but they also offer tailor-made tours with special departure dates for family, school, university and special interest groups. The company can adapt itineraries to suit any budget, interests and timeframe.

Threshing rice



Fansipan summit

Pacific Discovery tours are personalized, interpretive and educational using the philosophy of experiential education – where learning is hands-on and tangible. They have developed meaningful connections with people and places visited which is reflected in the quality of experiences they are able to offer. The company's strong relationships developed over many years working with local communities and NGOs ensure a rewarding and inspiring experience for participants.

How it helps: As an ethical tourism operator, Pacific Discovery utilises locally-owned transport and accommodation, so participant's money remains in the communities they visit. Fascinating excursions and volunteer opportunities are integral to the experience, and Pacific Discovery's time spent working with local NGOs in education, youth development, health and the environment, enable cultural exchange, insights and increased awareness of issues affecting local communities. All tours are carbon-neutral through hands-on tree planting projects, and they support grassroots charities and NGOs in Vietnam.

Pacific Discovery educates its clients about the environmental and social impacts of their travel, and endeavours to ensure the tours are of benefit to the host communities and environments as well as of benefit to its clients. The company prides itself as an ethical tourism operator. Refer to its ethical travel guidelines ⁽¹⁾ and sustainability policy ⁽²⁾ for details.




⁽¹⁾ www.pacificdiscovery.org/ethics.pdf

⁽²⁾ www.pacificdiscovery.org/sustainability.pdf

Location and booking information

Tokyo Trading & Tourist
 Mr Truong Dinh Lam, Director
 34. Tran Cao Van St, Hue city, Vietnam
 Tel: (+84) [0] 54 821467
 Fax: (+84) [0] 54 821466
 E-mail: dongkinh@dng.vnn.vn

Fruitful Encounters

-  **Activity:** Saigon-Mytho Toserco tours.
-  **Location:** My Tho City, Tien Giang Province in the Mekong Delta region.
-  **Tip:** Durians are too pungent to take back to your hotel or on a flight

Learn about the durian, rambutan, dragon fruit and star apple cultivation while sampling the products and meeting fruit farmers in their plantations.

The experience: Saigon-Mytho Toserco is located in the My Tho Dai Pho area, or Cho Cu, formerly well known as one of the three largest commercial centres in Vietnam's south, and the gateway to the development of the southern Vietnam region alongside Cu Lao Pho (Cu Lao Town) in Bien Hoa and Ha Tien.

Saigon-Mytho specialises in fruit orchard tours that stop at three main destinations in the Mekong River Delta's Tien Giang Province. The most popular is Ngu Hiep Island, where the company has funded several projects. This locale provides tourists with close-up interactions with the resident at the Ngu Hiep Commune in Cai Lay District through participating in daily activities such as farming, cooking and fishing. The excursion starts with a private river cruise from My Tho City to Ngu Hiep Island. Once ashore, visitors take a bike ride along the narrow pathways to an ancient house to enjoy its surrounding durian garden and learn how to plant and recognise the different types of this pungent yet popular fruit.

Label photo



Label photo

A delicious Vietnamese lunch follows and is served at a quaint 100-seat restaurant supported by Saigon-Mytho. After lunch, tourists head to a village on the banks of Tien River with its memorable "monkey bridges".

Saigon-Mytho's plantation tour then ventures to the Star Apple Garden (Vu Sua Lo Ren) at the Vinh Kim commune in Chau Thanh District and the Dragon Fruit Garden in Cho Gao District. Visitors sample the fresh fruits, learn how to make 'leaf cake' – a simple countryside delicacy – view the daily activities of the local people on a bike journey and enjoy a lunch of traditional Mekong River Delta dishes such as shrimp soup with water lily buds and steamed garden vegetables.


How it helps: Saigon-Mytho invests in the destinations its visits to help ensure sustainable development. The construction of their projects uses design characteristics that respect and maintain the national character of southern Vietnam. Tourists have the opportunity to sample unlimited amounts of farmers' produce such as durian, dragon fruit, star apples and rambutan in the plantations they visit. These taste tests lead to sales, which boost the farmers incomes.

Location and booking information


Saigon-Mytho Toserco
 Ms Huynh Thi Hong Hanh
 2/7 Nguyen Huynh Duc St., Ward 8, My Tho City, Tien Giang, Vietnam
 Tel: (+84) [0] 73 872191
 Fax: (+84) [0] 73 881912
 E-mail: saigon-mytho@vnn.vn / saigon_mytho@vnn.vn
 Web: www.saigonmytho.com

Ho Chi Minh City Branch
 126 Nguyen Cu Trinh St., Dist.1, HoChiMinh city, Viet Nam
 Tel: (+84) [0] 8920 7390/91
 Fax: (+84) [0] 8837 0572

Putting Sapa First

 **Activity:** Sapa Tourism Information and Promotion Centre (TIPC of Sapa).

 **Location:** 2 Fansipan Street, Sapa Town.

 **Tip:** The centre has good information on voluntourism and homestays.

Take advantage of a not-for-profit information centre in Sapa to plan your accommodation and trips to the surrounding mountains.

The experience: With Sapa rising as the hub for travel in northwest Vietnam, the government decided to fund the Sapa Tourism Information and Promotion Centre (TIPC of Sapa), which opened in 2003. The objective of the non-profit centre is to disseminate information and provide a free consulting service to tourists. Visitors can stop at the TIPC, located at 2 Fansipan Street, to receive free advice on the best method of transportation or route to reach destinations in the region, and where to stay when they arrive. The centre provides credible up-to-date information on reliable tour operators, points of interest, car services, train ticket agents and hotels. Also available at TIPC of Sapa are brochures describing tours, the region, local cultures and environment and how to travel responsibly when heading out to the surrounding area. Another aim of TIPC of Sapa is to support local minority people by helping to establish community-based tourism, with successful projects in the Ban Ho, Tan Van, San Sa Ho and Ta Phin communes. The tourism services they provide, such as guided tours, homestays, cultural shows and voluntourism activities are then promoted to travellers by TIPC of Sapa.

Sapa minority



Exchange culture

The centre also houses a Craftlink Shop in Sapa town, and hosts several websites to assist foreign and domestic visitors. Those looking for dependable accommodation can log on to www.sapa-hotels.com. Information on Sapa, which is also available in Vietnamese, can be found at www.sapatourism.info.vn, while similar information in French is located at www.sapa-tourism.com.

How it helps: TIPC of Sapa has been tasked by the government to help the local minority people develop community-based tourism in line with local policies, and connect travellers to their products so the area's residents can participate in tourism and improve their lives. The centre guarantees local tour service providers receive an equitable share of business to ensure a fair disbursement of tourism revenue. As an intermediary for tourism advertising, TIPC of Sapa makes certain that all receive equal exposure.

All TIPC of Sapa's sustainable tourism services and activities bring benefits to the region, contribute to the local economic development, improve the locals lifestyles and help solve employment problems for the minority people in the villages, while increasing awareness in protecting the region's culture and natural environment. The centre also cooperates with SNV (Netherlands Development Organization) and Bread for the World (BdFW) when carrying out its sustainable tourism projects in Sapa.

Location and contact information

Sapa Tourism Information and Promotion Centre
Mr Nguyen Van Manh
02 Fansipan street, Sapa town, Lao Cai Province, Vietnam
Tel: (+84) [0] 20 871975
Fax: (+84) [0] 20 871976
E-mail: sapatipc@gmail.com / sapatourism@hn.vnn.vn
Web: www.sapatourism.info.vn
Open daily: 0730-1130 and 1330-1730

National and Regional Tourism Offices

Vietnam National Administration of Tourism
80 Quan Su Street, Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi
Tel: (+84) [0] 4942 3760
Fax: (+84) [0] 4 942 4115
www.vietnamtourism.gov.vn

Royal Government of Cambodia
Ministry of Tourism
3 Monivong Blvd.,
Phnom Penh 12258, Cambodia.
Fax: (+855) 23 212 837
E-mail: info@mot.gov.kh
www.mot.gov.kh

Lao National Tourism Administration
Tourism Marketing and Promotion Department
P.O. Box: 3556, Lane Xang Avenue,
Hatsady Village, Chanthabouly District,
Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR.
Tel: (+856) [0] 21 212248; 212251.
Fax: (+856) [0] 21 212769; 217910.
E-mail: ttmpd_lnta@yahoo.com
Web: www.tourismlaos.gov.la
www.ecotourismlaos.com
www.trekkingcentrallaos.com
www.muonglaomagazine.com

Mekong Tourism Office
5th Flr. Office of Tourism Development
Ministry of Tourism & Sports
154 Rama 1 Road, National Stadium
Bangkok 10330, Thailand
Tel: (66-2) 612-4150/1
Fax: (66-2) 612-4152
E-mail: info@MekongTourism.org
Web: www.MekongTourism.org



Development NGOs

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation
Very active in poverty-reduction side of tourism in
Mekong countries.
www.snvworld.org

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
www.unwto.org
Information on its UNWTO ST-EP Programme
(Sustainable Tourism - Eliminating Poverty):
www.unwto.org/step/index.php=41

Mekong Private Sector Development Facility
This is an initiative of the International Finance
Corporation, part of the World Bank Group. In the
Mekong region, IFC manages the Mekong Private
Sector Development Facility (MPDF) as a technical
assistance program covering Vietnam, Lao PDR and
Cambodia. It gives loans, equity and finance to build
the private sector in the GMS and beyond.
www.ifc.org

National Protected Areas in the Mekong Region
Understand the background to the NPAs, which are a
relatively new phenomenon.
www.mekong-protected-areas.org

The World Conservation Union
The Union's mission is to influence, encourage and
assist societies throughout the world to conserve the
integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that
any use of natural resources is equitable and
ecologically sustainable.
<http://www.iucn.org/en/about/>

Online NGO Directories
For an Internet directory of NGOs in Laos visit:
www.directoryofngos.org.
For Cambodia, visit the Cooperation Committee for
Cambodia:
www.ccccbodia.org/SearchPage/search_page.html

For Vietnam, visit the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre at
<http://www.ngocentre.org.vn/node/> and click on
"Directory".

Responsible Tourism Resources

The International Centre for Responsible Tourism

This is an extensive online resource with specialist sections on a myriad of topics such as the responsible tourism book series, research on the value of tourism to protected areas, market entry and sustainability training for small businesses, the globally responsible leadership initiative, the fair-trade labelling organisation, training for tourism managers, case studies from around the world, and more.
www.icrtourism.org

The Responsible Tourism Partnership

The Responsible Tourism Partnership is a not for profit organisation that works in partnerships to improve destinations for local people and their visitors.
<http://www.responsibletourismpartnership.org>

Irresponsible tourism

This is where you can blow the whistle on practices in the travel and tourism industry which you think are irresponsible, and discuss them with others. The forum and its threads can be read by anyone, but only registered users can post responses, comments and create new threads.
www.irresponsibletourism.info/forum

Responsible Tourism Awards

Nominations can be made online.
www.responsibletourismawards.com

Responsibletravel.com

responsibletravel.com is a directory of screened holidays run by hundreds of specialist operators and accommodations. The holidays have been screened to ensure that the local people benefit as much as possible and any negative environmental impacts on the destination are minimised. The site has a very good responsible travel newsletter.
www.responsibletravel.com.

Friends of World Heritage

Friends of World Heritage is dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of protecting World Heritage, promoting sustainable development, and offering ways to explore these sites through sustainable travel.



It encourages people to:

- . become active and talk about the importance of World Heritage;
- . volunteer in conservation activities at World Heritage sites
- . travel to the sites to support local economic development
- . sign up to become a Friend; and,
- . contribute to the Friends of World Heritage Fund.
www.friendsofworldheritage.org

Sustainable tourism

An energetic online resource covering all major aspects of sustainable tourism and ecotourism – including urban ecotourism.
www.sustainabletourism.net

The Thorn Tree

The Thorn Tree is Lonely Planet's forum for travellers to exchange information and opinions. There are many discussions on Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and on specialist themes.
<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/>

Wikipedia.org

The world's online 'democratic' encyclopaedia addresses responsible tourism as "sustainable" tourism. There are also discussions on ecotourism and community based sustainable tourism

Tourism Concern

Tourism Concern works with communities in destination countries to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism and with the outbound tourism industry in the UK to find ways of improving tourism so that local benefits are increased. It fights exploitation in tourism.
www.tourismconcern.org.

Wildlife Conservation Society

The WCS strives to save wildlife and wild lands. It is very active in the Greater Mekong sub-region. Its country-specific pages list ongoing projects and have links to online slide shows.
www.wcs.org.

Code Green: Experiences of a Lifetime, Lonely Planet

It describes 82 trips from around the world and highlights the responsible element of each one.

Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & The Greater Mekong, Lonely Planet

524-page book that includes 28 maps, a chapter on ancient wonders, detailed information on border crossings, sustainable travel information and extensive accommodation listings. www.lonelyplanet.com

25 Ultimate Experiences: Ethical Travel, Rough Guides

Describes 25 trips that minimize the visitor's effect on the environment. It also provides tips on ethical clothes shopping, cultural sensitivity and volunteering abroad.

Green Travel: The Worlds Best Eco-Lodges & Earth-Friendly Hotels, Fodor's Travel (April 2008). The book also discusses ethical issues such as giving money to beggars, visiting countries ruled by oppressive governments, and renting a car.

Photographic Credits

The Guide to Responsible Tourism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam would not have been possible without generous contributions of free photographs from individuals and organizations.

In particular, we would like to thank:

Dr Mark Infield, Asia Pacific Regional Director, for providing photographs of The Pu Luong-Cuc Phuong limestone mountain range in Vietnam on page xx.

Arnoud Steeman, 2003, Mission report: Community Development, PARC Project VIE/95/G31&O31, Government of Viet Nam (FPD)/UNOPS/UNDP/Scott Wilson Asia-Pacific Ltd., Ha Noi (for his picture villagers on a bicycle in Vietnam's Yokdon profile on page xx.)

Markus Madeja, 2002, Planning Support Document: Ecotourism Promotion and Development, PARC Project VIE/95/G31&O32, Government of Viet Nam (FPD)/UNOPS/UNDP/Scott Wilson Asia-Pacific Ltd., Ha Noi (for his lady on a lake picture in Vietnam's Yokdon profile on page xxx.)

Kees Sprengers for his pictures of the Akha Experience in Laos (page x) and trekking in Luang Namtha (page xx). Visit: www.kees.zenfolio.com.

Bart Verweij and SNV for pictures of Savannakhet Eco Guides Service on page xxx.

Dr Robert Lee for the pictures of Don Daeng (Laos) on page xxx



